NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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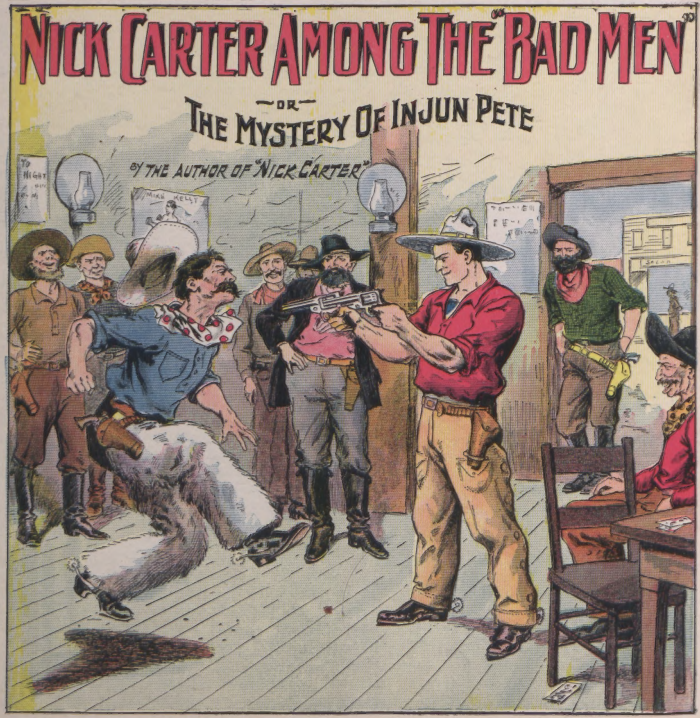
NICK CARTER AMONG THE BAD MEN

—OR— THE MYSTERY OF INJUN PETE

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



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Nick Carter Among the "Bad Men";

OR,

THE MYSTERY OF INJUN PETE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE TENDERFOOT IN THE "LONE DOG."

Bill Hoover, bartender, owner, and general factotum of the "Long Dog" Saloon, Wyoming, was holding forth on the general blessedness of being a citizen of "these hyar United States," and the fact that every man, however humble, had a chance of filling the Presidential chair. About this time J. Pierpont Morgan was expected on one of his Western trips, and it was anticipated that he would make the town his headquarters.

"Yes, siree Bob," finished Hoover eloquently, thumping the bar with his big fist, "there are states an' states. The state of matrimony an' the state of coma—coma being in the Latin the word for dope; an' Latin being a intellectooal langwidge, which you boys ain't on readin' terms with—but the state for me is the State of Wyoming, sitooated in the great United States. The land——"

"The land of the free an' the home of the slave," finished Griggs, the foreman of the Bar H cattle outfit, who had come into town to ship steers to Chicago. "An' now, Hoover," he added, with a laugh, "having got all them high an' mighty sentiments outern your system, let's drink to ther health of the man what will leave some of his coin in this burg. Come on boys, liquor up!"

There was a general stampede for the bar, "liquoring up" being an invitation in Wyoming which is always promptly accepted. Out there a man is judged by his ability to "pack" a gun and his celerity on the "draw."

"Let me help you down that toast, boys," suddenly said a voice from the open door, as the men prepared to shoot the "red-eye" down their iron throats.

The men turned as this newcomer stalked to the bar, and calmly helped himself to a glass. He was of medium height, massive of shoulder and chest, but lean in the flank, with steady gray eyes and an aggressive chin. He was covered with the fine white alkali dust of the trail, and dressed in the picturesque rustler costume, like the members of the Bar H cattle outfit—brown leather chaps, Mexican spurs, and a wide Stetson sombrero. His shirt was of blue flannel, the sleeves rolled above

the elbows, exposing powerful forearms and a fringe of red flannel undershirt. On his right wrist he wore an elbow wrist-guard of buckskin, and a rawhide quirt dangled from it. Slung about his hip was a thimble belt of cartridges and a holster carrying a .44 Colt. This holster was strapped down at the bottom to his chaps; and this fact, insignificant to an Easterner, was carefully noted by the occupants of the "Lone Dog," and secretly commented upon. Out West, when a man is looking for, or expects, trouble, he always straps down the bottom of his holster, as a preparatory measure so that it will not "hitch up" when he draws his gun. For the delay of a fraction of a second in the "draw" means a funeral for him.

Bill Hoover and the men eyed this newcomer narrowly, and then the former said:

"It ain't generally our way to liquor up with folks whose brand we don't know; but that's a toast we boys would drink with any man, stranger, an' so here goes!"

It was drunk in silence.

The stranger unearthed a small buckskin bag to settle, but Bill Hoover majestically waved it back.

"No charge for drinking such a toast when you're in the Lone Dog. No, siree bob! Be you long in these hyar parts?" he added conversationally.

"'Bout a week," said the stranger. "Do I look like a foreign brand?"

Hoover and the men looked at him again.

"Well," remarked Griggs, the foreman, "we can't say as how you look as if you was knocked off a parlor mantelpiece. But still, I'll bet you're no rustler. Sheep-herdin'?" he asked rather contemptuously.

There is a long-standing feud between the sheep-herders and the cattlemen, because cattle will not feed where sheep have been, and there is a continual fight for the range.

The stranger shook his head, with a smile. "No; sheep ain't in my line. More like sharks. I'm simply out here looking up an old friend of mine."

"Friend?" said one of the men, with a short laugh. "Huh! You don't look for no friend with your gun packed like that!" and he eyed the strapped holster.

"Say, stranger, I've seen that face o' your'n before," said Bill Hoover, leaning across the bar. "Ain't you never been in these hyar parts before?"

"I guess there ain't many parts I ain't been in," laughed the stranger. "Maybe you saw my face on some patent-medicine advertisement."

"Come to think of it," agreed Hoover, scratching his head, "it *was* on some paper or other I seen your face. You ain't this Doctor Munyon chap?"

"No. But my name's on medicine, all right. My name's Carter."

"Judas priest!" exclaimed Hoover. "Carter's Little Liver Pills! And what are you doing in them togs, and here in Wyoming? You've hit the wrong trail. We don't cotton to patent medicine, Mr. Doctor Carter, Esq., and the only liver pills we all use comes from the bottle we carry right here." He hitched his holster significantly, and the men laughed.

"A doctor tenderfoot!" jeered one of the men.

"Tenderfoot?" came a cry from the doorway, and the next minute a cloud of alkali dust resolved itself into another newcomer, a desperate-looking customer, with sheepskin chaps, his black eyes cold and dead as a toad's, and set very close together.

"Howdy, boys!" he said, with a curt nod. "Did I hear the word tenderfoot? Tote him out! Tote him out, or the peace of this here law-abiding community will be split wide open!"

The men made way for him as he strode to the bar, placed his back to it, and rested a hand on the butt of his gun. He was "Cash" Dagget, a notorious "bad" man, one who led the toughest gang of greasers and half-breeds in the West; a man who was suspected of running off stock and horses—crimes which, in that primitive section, are punished with death. And yet no one had come forward to back his suspicions, for Dagget was as dangerous as he was personally brave to foolhardiness, and among his kind supremacy is never gained by words, but by deeds. So they truckled to him, waiting for a Moses to arise and lead them out of their bondage. Once in awhile a Moses did crop up, and was peacefully buried, the coroner's verdict being: "Suicide. Did not draw his gun quick enough."

It was this human death who now swept the room with his malicious eyes, seeking for the "tenderfoot" who might furnish him a half-hour's sport. Then his eyes encountered those of the stranger who had given his name as Carter, and who was leaning idly against the bar. He appeared indifferent to everything, but his own keen eyes had omitted nothing of the foregoing episode. In fact, a satisfied smile had come to his lips on the bad man's entrance, much the same as a spider might exult on the arrival of the expected fly.

"Say," said Dagget, at length, to Hoover, after a careful inspection of the tenderfoot, "would you cover it with plush, or stick it in a glass case with wax flowers? Ain't he real cunning? And all the hardware he carries! Let's see you dance, stranger!" It seemed as if his gun leaped to meet his hand, and the flash and report was instantaneous, as a bullet cut a long white scar in the boards by the stranger's feet. "Dance, you ornery-looking cripple!"

"What will you have—waltz, or two-step?" asked the stranger good-humoredly. Only his eyes were ugly.

"Cash" Dagget's reply was another shot, which tore up the floor half an inch from the other's right foot.

"I'm runnin' this here amusement emporium!" he said savagely; "and, when I says dance, don't you stop to

pick no flowers, or ask questions! Get busy with your feet!"

The stranger looked into the muzzle of the blued steel Colt, and then deliberately laid his hat on the bar, preparatory to obeying the command. Then he commenced to dance—a regular old-fashioned Southern breakdown. The men kept time with their feet, for there was something in the dance that was irresistibly appealing.

"Faster—faster!" ordered Dagget, motioning with his gun. The other obeyed. Suddenly his feet became entangled, and he came to the floor with a thump. The men roared, and Dagget slapped his thigh in enjoyment. For a moment his gun was lowered, his head thrown back in laughter. He recovered himself—only to find that the stranger was looking at him over the sights of his drawn gun.

"Keep that gun down!" said the tenderfoot sharply. "Drop it on the floor, muzzle down! Kick it over here! Thanks! Now, get busy with *your* feet, or I'll blow your head loose!"

Dagget glowered at him. It was the first time he had ever had the drop against him. The men were trying to hide their smiles. They knew "Cash" would never forgive their jeers. Again the bad man eyed the implacable Colt, and the steady eyes behind it, and then he sullenly walked to the center of the room and commenced to execute a foolish and awkward two-step.

It was humiliating in the extreme, and even Hoover could not hide the smile on his broad face as he watched the famous bully prance about like a cow until the sweat stood out on his forehead.

After half an hour's performance, the tenderfoot gave the command to halt.

"Now, you hit the trail, Cash Dagget!" he said slowly; "and think over the lesson in manners you have been taught right here! Don't ask a man to do what you won't do yourself; and it's a good idea, if you are fond of bullying, to know first whom you're stacking up against. It will save funeral expenses."

"I'll know you again, all right!" said Dagget savagely, backing to the door. "You got the drop on me by a trick, but it won't happen a second time! You'll need to pack a gun slicker'n you ever have——"

"Yes; I guess we'll meet again," cut in the tenderfoot quietly. "But I'm not out here for my health; and, if you are, it is only fair to you to let you know that I can pack a gun, all right."

Dagget had now reached the open door. His back was to it. Suddenly the Colt in the tenderfoot's hand commenced to crack. Out of the heavy blue cloud about the muzzle long flashes darted out toward the bad man, like search-light beams in a fog, and the smash, smash, smash of the heavy bullets could be heard as they thudded into the heavy oaken door. When the firing ceased, Dagget had disappeared, but where his head had rested against the door its outline was marked in the wood by bullets.

"Say, stranger," said Griggs, the foreman, with a long sigh, "that's what I call shootin'!"

"It are!" echoed Hoover impressively. "But look out, neighbor! Cash is a bad man when riled, and you have sure got his goat. He'll get you in the back, if he can't in the front. But, for a medicine doctor, you shoot off liver pills faster and straighter than I ever seen any one! You're all right, Mr. Doctor Carter, Esq., and I hope your business trip to these here parts will be O. K. We ain't much on patent medicines, but we'll get as sick as we can—only don't hand us them there lead liver pills! Keep 'em for Cash—we all only pay by check."

CHAPTER II.

THE PLOT.

"Has Mr. Dagget been long a resident of this law-abiding community?" asked the patent-medicine doctor, with a smile.

"'Bout six months, I guess, though it seems longer," replied Hoover. "He ain't what you might call an object of endearment to this hyar community. I'm willing to pay his funeral expenses any time he says so. Ever meet him afore this?"

"I did," said the stranger slowly. "He's the friend I blew out here to see."

The men of the Bar H outfit had filed out by now, and the stranger and the owner of the "Lone Dog" were alone.

Hoover meditatively scratched his head, eying the other out of the corner of his eye. Suddenly he slapped his thigh a resounding whack.

"Judas priest, stranger!" he said, with a gasp. "I've got your face branded all right enough now! It come to me suddenlike, an' struck me all of a heap. Say!" he whispered excitedly; "you've been locoing me. You ain't no patent-medicine doctor. Your name's Carter, all right, but, by hicky, you're Nick Carter, or I'll wear a hair shirt! Am I right? If so, shake—shake, an' you've Bill Hoover for a friend, and with the diamond hitch buckled around his heart for keeps!"

There was something almost childish in the way he held out his great hairy paw, and the look of admiration in his eyes.

The other looked at him closely for a moment, and then gripped the extended hand and wrung it until Hoover squirmed in agony, though he pretended he did not feel the viselike grip.

"Yes; I'm Nick Carter—but only to you. You're a man, Hoover, and I can trust you——"

"Bet a million—bet a million on it!" cried Hoover warmly. "That's the words, Mr. Carter! In Hoover

we trust—no trust, and we bust! Them's the words!" And the proprietor swelled out his barrel chest until it looked like a hogshead. "Mr. Carter, this are the proudest moment of my life—not even excepting the day I broke for daylight, and was borned a human being! It are wonderful to have the greatest detective in the world to shake you by the hand, drink your whisky, and say, 'Bill Hoover, you're a man I can trust!' Yes, siree bob! And mum's the word, though. I feel like running amuck in this hyar law-abiding community, and proclaiming the fact that I have shook the hand of a celebrity—even if it did hurt," he finished, looking ruefully at his crushed hand.

"The hand of friendship never hurts," said Nick Carter, with a smile. "And now, Hoover, my reasons for coming here are this: The greatest financier in the United States is coming here for an outing, or a hunting-trip, as you know. He is expected to arrive this week. I have learned that his guide will be Cash Dagget. Is that so?"

"It sure is. Cash, though no ornament to this law-abiding community, as I remarked before, can take a trail better than any man here. A better guide and scout you couldn't find between here and next Christmas. I don't know how he got the job, but he come in here one day half-drunk, and begun blowing around how he had a pull in New York that no one could beat, and that he had got the appointment to guide Mr. Morgan on his trip here. I'll 'low Cash can scout some, but it beats Sam how he can get the pull over men who have a heap side clearer notions of things than he has."

"I know he has influence at New York, though it seems queer," said the detective slowly. "Cash was born and raised in Boston, before he came out here. He had to skip, because the city made it too hot for him. That was years ago, but I remember him. He is the special protégé of several political gentlemen who stop at nothing—not even murder—in the attainment of their desires, and Cash made himself very useful to them. By the way, what party do you belong to, Hoover?"

"Democratic," said that gentleman emphatically, and with certain pride. "But I ain't a rabid one. I mean, I honor whatever President the people, by their votes, choose. It ain't for me to kick. And a good man's a good man, whether he is Republican, Democratic, or—belongs to any other party."

"I agree with you," said Nick Carter. "You have the true American spirit. The best for the best. One for all."

"What are you after him for?" asked Hoover.

"Simply this," said Nick Carter impressively; "there's a plot to kidnap Mr. Morgan on this trip of his, and to hold him for ransom. And Cash Dagget got the appointment as guide for this very reason."

"Judas priest!" exclaimed Hoover, in amazement. "Kidnap Morgan? That ornery critter of a Cash Dagget? Well, I guess not! Not so long as any of the boys in this hyar law-abiding community knows a Colt smoke-stick from plug tobacco! No, siree bob! Cash Dagget be hanged! I'll let daylight through Cash's liver, right proper!" He buckled his cartridge-belt tighter, gave his trousers a hitch, and prepared to leave the bar.

But Nick Carter restrained him by laying a firm but kindly hand upon his shoulder.

"If it was his mere life I wish, I could have had it the minute he entered the door here," he said quietly. "But he is merely the tool. He is working for crooks with a long pull, and these are the men I want to get. I must have absolute proof. You can help me, Hoover, by telling me where this Cash Dagget lives."

"Well, that is a sure pretty steep question," said the owner of the "Lone Dog," scratching his head to promote thought. "This hyar law-abiding community would like to know the answer to that question. I guess some run-off hosses and stock will be found wherever Cash hangs out. He always covers his trail. We suspect that his cache is across the river there," pointing out the door to the distant stream, "and it's among the chaparral and mesquit somewheres. He's got a pretty tough crowd out there, and none of the boys have been dying to look 'em up."

"Well, *I'll* have to look him up," said Nick Carter, with a smile.

"Say, go easy, boss—go easy!" adjured Bill Hoover anxiously. "Cash ain't the man to play a lone hand against. Let me and some of the boys tote along with you——"

"I'm accustomed to playing lone hands, Hoover," cut in the great detective quietly. "I thank you, however, for your proffered help. Now, I am going to make the Lone Dog my headquarters, though I don't expect to be here much. I travel in light-marching order, and will have my small trunk sent over here from the station. To every one but you I am a cattle-raiser from Texas, who has come on here to look over a new stock-farm, with a view to purchasing it. Our present conversation is to be kept secret——"

"But about the kidnaping of Morgan?" asked Hoover anxiously.

"That's my business, Hoover. Keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut. And don't be astonished at whatever happens."

"This here law-abiding community ain't much astonished these days," said Hoover; "but you're stacking up against a pretty slick hand when you tackle Cash and his gang. However, I've heard of you before, and I know you're no infant. I'll keep mum; and, if there's anything I can do—help in the smallest way—why, you've only to say the word."

"Thank you," said Nick Carter, with a smile. "And now I'll have that trunk of mine rustled round."

It was thus that "N. Carter," a ranchman from Texas, took up his abode at the "Lone Dog" hostelry, preparatory to looking about for a suitable stock-farm to purchase. And big Bill Hoover was the only one in the "law-abiding community" who knew that the supposed ranchman was none other than Nick Carter, the greatest living detective, whose exploits and wonderful adventures are in the mouth of every man, woman, and child from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the Gulf of Mexico to Labrador's frozen straits.

His unerring judgment and personal bravery had been the means of unwinding many a tangled skein in the past, even skeins held by the crowned heads of Europe. None knew better than he the caliber of foes he was pitting himself against, foes rendered only the more deadly in view of the fact that they would not come out into the open, but preferred to deal their blows in the dark.

The man whose brain manipulated the plot in question was a former policy king of New York. His name was "Ace" McGloin. He was a gutter-snipe of the great metropolis, who had learned all the tricks taught by the underworld before he had learned his primer.

It was Nick Carter's own suggestion that he come on to Wyoming and watch Cash Dagget, who he knew as McGloin's tool, while Chief Wilkie, of the secret service, watched the other end. They simply knew that a plot for kidnaping Morgan was under way, but how it would be effected they did not know.

Nick Carter had long been watching for an opportunity to catch McGloin "dead to rights," and so, despite Chief Wilkie's remonstrances, he made him promise to keep the matter secret, even from J. Pierpont Morgan, who was to go on his trip as usual, and to give McGloin and his tools every opportunity to make their attempted crime a complete success.

Chief Wilkie, though demurring at first, knew Nick Carter's wonderful ability, and let the entire matter rest with him. Once in touch with Cash Dagget, the great detective could get at the root of the matter, and lay his plans accordingly. Meanwhile, if any further developments arose in New York, it was agreed that Chief Wilkie would communicate by cipher telegram with Nick Carter, at the "Lone Dog" Hotel.

It can be understood that Nick Carter was facing one of the most difficult and dangerous combinations encountered in his wonderful career. Add to this that he had already earned the personal hatred of the gang he would have full need of all his unswerving shrewdness and personal bravery.

CHAPTER III.

INJUN PETE.

Shortly after the arrival of Nick Carter's small trunk at the "Lone Dog," and his assignment to the best room the "hotel" afforded—a room primitive in its space and accommodations—a figure could be seen noiselessly creeping down the rickety stairs that led from the upper corridor to the barroom.

It was that of an Indian. He was of medium height, with long black hair, twisted in two braids. An old, weather-beaten Stetson sombrero was crushed on his head, and a bright Navajo blanket was wrapped round his shoulders. An ancient pair of light-blue cavalry trousers, with beaded moccasins, completed his attire.

The barroom was empty, as he shuffled in, but for big Bill Hoover, who was behind the bar, trying to read, by the aid of a stubby forefinger—the town weekly paper.

"How!" grunted the Indian gruffly, shuffling over to the proprietor.

In a flash, Bill Hoover's large hand had replaced the paper with his Colt revolver.

"What do you mean by coming through the family entrance like that?" he bellowed. "Make a breeze—make a breeze, you ornery-looking reprobate, or Uncle Sam'll be feeding one less Injun on the reservation!"

"Fire-water. Heap dry," said the Indian stolidly, pointing to the row of bottles on the shelf back of the proprietor.

"I'll fire you out, confound yer!" roared Hoover, flourishing the Colt. "This here shack is a first-class emporium for white gentlemen! How did you get in here? What do you mean by sneaking past me and going upstairs? Open up that mouth of your'n, or I'll open it for you with a bullet!"

The Indian looked stolidly at him. Then he chuckled noiselessly in the characteristic manner of his race. He crept to the bar, placing a dark-brown hand over his high nose.

"Me come for medicine-man," he whispered sibilantly.

"Who?" said Hoover, in astonishment.

"Medicine-man. Heap big chief man-who-makes-pills."

"Oh!" said Hoover, his eyes narrowing. "What's your name, and where did you blow in from?"

"Me Injun Peter. Me from the big city New York. Me come to see Nick Carter."

"Look in the other alley," said Hoover curtly. "There's no one by that name here."

"Me come about the running off with the money man," ran on the Indian stolidly.

"You're talking through your blanket!" said Hoover. "I don't know what you mean."

"Me come to kill Nick Carter," said Injun Pete placidly.

"You don't say?" said Hoover. But his eyes flashed, and he fingered his Colt suggestively. "Oh, well, that's different, my ornery-looking friend. Just take a chair there. Mebbe there is a gentleman by that name here, and mebbe he would like to oblige you. Now, take that chair. I'll call up from the door there. If you try to get away, I'll make a sieve out of your hide!" He kept his gun on the Indian, as he started to come from behind the bar.

Then the Indian commenced to laugh noiselessly.

"Bill Hoover," he said, in a totally different voice, "you are all right! You are loyal, and know how to keep a silent tongue."

"Nick Carter!" gasped the big landlord, his eyes staring. "Judas priest! you can change your brand——"

"I wanted to see how it would work," laughed the detective. "Merely the building up of my nose and the staining of hands, face, and arms, with a few other tricks of the trade. If I deceived you, I can deceive Cash Dagget."

Bill Hoover was slowly recovering from his surprise.

"You're going out to visit Cash in them outlandish duds?"

"I admit they don't look very pretty," said Nick Carter, with a humorous smile, "but they are necessary."

"Better pack a gun," said Hoover gloomily. "I wish you'd tote me along."

The detective threw back his blanket, and exposed a cartridge-belt, Colt revolver, and bowie-knife.

"Injun Pete heeled," he said, in a guttural voice. "No," he resumed, in his natural tones; "I think you can benefit me more by remaining here. A message may come for me at any time."

A clatter of hoofs suddenly sounded on the main street, and a cloud of alkali dust drifted through the door. The hoof-beats stopped, and men's voices could be heard.

"I reckon you won't have to go to look for Cash," said Hoover, his hand clenching on the butt of his gun, as he looked through the window. "Here he is now, with some of his gang. He's come back to shoot up the tenderfoot who made him dance. Skin your eyes, boss!"

A minute later, Cash Dagget, a gun in either hand, raised above his head, ready for instant lowering, sprang through the door, followed by a half a dozen of his creatures, similarly armed.

"Where's that tenderfoot hoss-doctor?" he called softly, sweeping the room with eyes and gun. "I'm going to show him a dance or two right now! Where is he, Bill Hoover?"

"He ain't here," said the landlord.

"You lie!" snapped Dagget.

Hoover's mouth straightened.

"That's a fighting word where I come from, Cash Dagget!" he said quietly. "You know that. Clear the room, and take your corner, for I'll——"

"Don't touch that gun!" warned Dagget savagely, as Hoover's hand dropped like lightning to his gun butt. "I ain't time to kill you now, nohow. Boys, clean out the rooms up-stairs!"

His men scattered through the house, while Injun Pete sat stolidly in a corner, and big Bill Hoover, with white face, kept his eyes on Cash Dagget.

In a minute the men had returned, empty-handed. Dagget laughed nastily.

"Got cold feet, and cleared out, I reckon."

"Did I lie?" asked Hoover ominously.

"No!" said Cash savagely. "Wish you had! I take that back. I'll give you another chance. Is the tenderfoot coming back?"

Hoover's eyes flashed to Injun Pete. The latter nodded imperceptibly.

"Yes," said the landlord. "Mebbe in a day or two."

Dagget eyed him for a moment, and then, apparently satisfied that the other was speaking the truth, reluctantly put up his guns. Then, apparently for the first time, his beady eyes noted the silent figure of the Indian.

"What you got there—another curiosity?" he asked Hoover, with a sneer. "I thought you run a white man's hotel. This ain't no place for cattle! Clear out—you with the smoked face and rag quilt!" he ordered, again drawing his gun.

Nick Carter slowly arose.

"How!" he said, majestically raising his hand—the red man's sign of peace.

"If you're looking for peace, hit the trail!" said Dagget.

"Me no look for peace," replied the detective, marvelously simulating the red man's voice and manner. "Me look for white man. Me look for big white chief. Him called Cash Dagget."

"Huh!" said Cash, slowly slipping his gun into its holster. His eyes were speculative. "Who are you from?"

"Big chief. Man-with-shiny-hat." Nick Carter made the motion of rubbing a high silk hat. "Me from big city New York."

"Was he asking for me?" asked Cash of Hoover.

"He was talking of the big city, and the great money-man, whatever that means," said Hoover truthfully.

In a moment Cash had come across the room, and drew the detective into a corner, out of earshot of the room's other occupants.

"Who sent you? Who is Man-with-shiny-hat?" he demanded softly.

"Him McGloin. Me Injun Pete," whispered Nick Carter, in his soft gutturals. "Me friend of his. Me from the reservation. Me know all about the running off of great white money-maker ——"

"Hush!" whispered Cash, his hand on the other's wrist. "Did he send a message?"

The great detective was at loss for answer. But his intuition caused him to guess at a reply—for reply he must.

"Yes. He say he come himself with great money-man. He come three sunrises from to-day. He trust me. He say I join you. He say I to be the runner that carries his messages from you to him, when he come here. I know the trail. He trust no one else."

Cash considered.

"How do I know you ain't playing me?" he asked, at length. "If you are——" he made a motion of cutting his throat.

"Me McGloin's friend," said Indian Pete, with simple dignity, drawing himself up. "Me no do this for wampum, or fire-water. Me McGloin's friend. Me do this, and he promise me charge of Indian store at agency, and he get Starlight, beautiful Cheyenne who me love, to wife. Him heap big chief."

"I guess that's all straight enough," said Dagget. "But say, didn't he give you no sign, nothing that I might brand you as being his man?"

His suspicions were awakening again. He was suspicious by nature.

Now, though Nick Carter had not known what he might meet in the way of difficulties, his great success could be laid in a small measure to the elaborate pains he took in providing beforehand for every contingency that might arise. The vast influence that was at his beck and call could provide him with unlimited credentials of every known character. So now he drew from his blanket a slip of paper, presumably signed by McGloin himself, on his own initialed note-paper, but which, in reality, was a forgery. It read:

"CASH DAGGET, Lone Dog, Wyoming: The bearer, Indian Pete, has my full confidence in the matter we know of. He will bring you a message.

(Signed) "McGLOIN."

"I ain't much on book-learning," said Cash, holding the letter close to his eyes, and pursing his lips, "but that's his brand, sure enough. From this on, you're one of the bunch, Injun Pete. Tote along."

He turned to Hoover.

"Injun Pete an' me was having a parley-voo over a cattle deal," he explained. "He's going to be my guest for a few days. I'll breeze in again in a few days, and make that tenderfoot lick dirt! If you put him wise, Bill Hoover, you'll take his fight against me on your own shoulders!"

Hoover did not reply. He looked at Indian Pete, and the shadow of a smile tightened his lips.

"I reckon," he said to himself, "if Cash knew who he was parley-vooing with, he wouldn't be quite so all-fired smart."

As Cash Dagget and his men, in company with Injun Pete, were about to leave the "Lone Dog," an incident occurred that for a moment threatened to bring about a climax.

A messenger from the local telegraph office swung up to the door, in a cloud of alkali dust, and entered the barroom.

"I got a wire for a man by the name of Carter—N. Carter. Any one with that brand lying round here?"

"Yes," said Hoover, seizing the envelope, and signing for it.

"It's marked 'mediate," said the messenger.

"I'll give it to him," said Hoover evenly.

"Huh!" cut in Cash, his eyes snapping; "so the liver-doctor tenderfoot gets messages? And his name's Carter? Huh! The only Carter I ever heard of is Nick Carter. Now, you said that tenderfoot wouldn't be back for two or three days, Hoover."

"I did," said the landlord. But his hand had fallen to the butt of his gun.

"Well, it's marked 'mediate," added Cash, with a grin. "It sure ought to be opened. Hand it over. Let's see what——"

He stopped. Big Bill Hoover, for once, had the drop on him. He had forestalled the other's demand.

"I'm running this here emporium, Cash Dagget!" he said quietly, over the sights of his steady Colt; "and the mail of this place belongs to Uncle Sam, not to folks like you! If one of your men starts to draw, I'll shoot *you*, Cash—remember that! And no one gets this here wire but N. Carter himself! Understand that, or this gun might happen to go off accidentallike!"

Cash Dagget was silent.

"Come on, boys," he said, finally, and turned on his heel. In his mind, he had decided that Bill Hoover was an obnoxious personage, who must be removed, with the tenderfoot, the first time opportunity afforded.

"Here!" said Hoover peremptorily; "you haven't settled for that drink you had, Injun Pete!"

"Me was going to settle," said Nick Carter, with dignity. He walked to the bar, bringing the small buckskin from his blanket. As Hoover gave him the change for the imaginary drink, he passed the contents of the envelope, now pressed to a small, hard ball, into the detective's expectant fingers.

As Cash and his men rode away to their cache across the river, Injun Pete, mounted on a spare bronco, found occasion to tighten his mount's saddle-girth. In the shadow of the horse he swiftly unrolled the message.

It was from Chief Wilkie, in New York, and Nick Carter smiled as he read it. It was in cipher code. Deciphered, it read:

"Expect Morgan Friday. McGloin going with him."

"Queer how accidents will help one out!" said the detective, as he mounted his horse. "My guess was cor-

rect. I told Cash Dagget that McGloin was coming, and now he is. And now to get on the inside of this conspiracy."

CHAPTER IV.

ALONE IN THE OUTLAW'S CACHE.

The cache—a word meaning lair, or stronghold—of Cash Dagget and his band was across the small river that bounded the south side of Lone Dog. It was a place which, from its natural surroundings, was an ideal hiding-place and fortress. It was by mere accident that Cash had discovered it, for its whereabouts was unknown to the oldest scout on the Southern trail. Its environs were similar in dreariness and impassability to the famous "Bad Lands" of Dakota, a landscape of rocks, burning sands, mesquit, and chaparral—lands where thirst is man's most implacable foe, for water is an unknown quantity in that locality. Replete with treacherous barriers and rocks that a goat could not scale.

By a curious freak of nature, it was an oasis in a desert. And nature had protected her workmanship from alien eyes by hedging it about with seemingly impassable barriers.

Apparently, as you took the lone trail across the river, there was nothing but rocks, and prairie-dog holes, and mesquit, and chaparral. This trail led up and up over the barren mountain range that flanked Lone Dog, and then descended gradually for about two miles, where, at its base, was clustered the small town of Silver Cañon. Hundreds had followed that trail for years, and none but Cash had ever discovered the paradise just beyond the wall of rock to the north of the trail.

Once beyond the seemingly impassable barrier of rock, one found in the cache all that was lacking in its exterior environs. It was sheltered from the winds, possessed splendid grazing grass, and boasted a clear stream of water. It was partially protected on three sides from rain and storm by the overhanging crags of the rock surrounding it.

Pursued one day by a posse, who were bent on hanging him for running off stock, Cash and his followers, sadly outnumbered, were taking the trail, with the view of escaping to Silver Cañon.

As they were about at the highest point of the trail, they discovered that another posse was waiting to head them off. It had seemed nothing but a stand-up fight against overwhelming odds, when Cash's bronco had slipped, and he had crashed against a huge boulder on his right. To his amazement, this boulder had turned out to be so delicately balanced by nature that it swung easily on a pivot, as it now did, pitching Cash into a narrow defile.

In a second that worthy had appreciated the immense worth of his accidental discovery, and, when the posse eventually arrived, Cash and his men had completely disappeared, though, in fact, they were but a dozen feet away, and could even hear the exclamations of astonishment from their pursuers. From that day the cache had been used exclusively by him, and its secret had been well kept from the "law-abiding community," for Cash knew how to rule his unruly underlings.

Such was the impregnable, hidden fortress Nick Carter found himself in, when once he had passed the pivot rock. That he was taking a great risk in thus shutting himself off from outside aid he well knew, but he relied upon his disguise and his fertile ingenuity to extricate himself from any possible contingency that might arise.

On the other hand, Cash Dagget was taking just as great a risk in thus exposing his secret hiding-place to a comparative stranger. Though McGloin's supposed reference vouched for Injun Pete, Cash was not a man to take too much for granted. His life of outlaw caused him to suspect every one whom he came in contact with.

Nick Carter now realized that, though received as an ally, he was virtually a prisoner within the cache—a prisoner of his own volition. Moreover, as evening wore on, he discovered that Cash had no intention of discussing with him the proposed plans of the kidnaping plot. As he, Injun Pete, was supposed to be conversant with the details, he could not broach the subject, for fear of exposing his own ignorance, and thus awakening suspicion.

But Chief Wilkie's message had said that J. Pierpont Morgan would not arrive in Lone Dog until Friday, which was three days from the present; therefore, the great detective had that length of time in which to ferret out the plot. It was absolutely necessary that he should be thoroughly conversant with the entire matter in order to lay his plans and bring his undertaking to a successful issue. As he had been expecting but one message from Chief Wilkie, it was not necessary for him to return to the Lone Dog Hotel.

The cache was well stocked with provisions, and Nick Carter employed his time between his arrival and the evening meal by unobtrusively reconnoitering his position. He soon ascertained the uncomfortable truth that there was absolutely no way out of the cache but through the narrow defile, guarded by the pivot rock and two armed guards, who never changed their position. This fact did not alarm him in the least.

"If it comes to a show-down," he said to himself, stretching himself out by the camp-fire, and lighting his long Indian pipe, "the easiest thing to do will be to shoot those two guards before they know what's happening. Once in the shelter of that defile, I could hold this crowd at bay—or run away. So far, the cards are with me, for I know who I am, and they don't."

The evening and the fore part of the night wore away without event of any kind. Nick Carter, in his guise of

Injun Pete, was left severely to himself. It was plain, from the way the men eyed him and Cash passed him by, that the latter had forbidden his men to give the Indian their confidence.

The detective knew that this veiled suspicion was not the result of direct knowledge, but merely the natural reserve shown by men of their stamp toward strangers. To them an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure. If they had suspected for a moment who Injun Pete really was, he would have been the target for twenty rifles.

"My cue is to be as dumb as a cigar-store Indian," said Nick to himself.

Consequently, he played his part of a stolid, indifferent red man to perfection. He ignored his associates so completely as they did him. The camp retired to rest shortly after twelve o'clock. It was a soft moonlight night in summer. The men lay in their blankets about the remains of the smoldering fire; but the two pickets were still on watchful guard by the pivot rock.

Apparently, Injun Pete was sleeping religiously; but, in reality, he was very much awake. One eye was on the two guards, and the other on Cash Dagget and his lieutenant, Spanish Joe. These two sat huddled over the dying fire, their heads close together.

"I guess I'll make a third in that heart-to-heart talk," said Nick to himself. "If I'm not mistaken, Cash trusts his men no more than he trusts himself. Spanish Joe is his only confidant. I suspect they are making the most of this quiet opportunity to go over a little private history.

Imperceptibly, and without making the slightest noise on the soft grass, Nick Carter wormed himself, Indian fashion, on his stomach, toward the whispering men. Slowly, slowly, he advanced, until, at length, he came within easy ear-shot.

What he overheard was of the utmost importance, and he listened, with every faculty on the alert.

"This is the game," Cash was saying softly. "It's well known about here that there's some gangs of cattle-rustlers and outlaws. My gang, for instance, is one. But they can't prove anything against me, thanks to this outfit, Joe. Now, I lead Morgan on his hunting-trip. We scare out this way. We are set upon by a gang of these here outlaws—you'll lead 'em, Joe—and you'll capture the whole party, and stock them in this cache.

"Then I'll breeze into Lone Dog, considerably excited and beaten up, and say as how a gang of outlaws set upon us and run off with Morgan, and are holding him for ransom. I'll say how I was wounded fighting for him, and how the gang are making for the Mexican frontier. Being wounded, it will have taken me three days to get back to Lone Dog, and by that time the outlaws will have had a good start.

"Then, after awhile, you and some of the boys come into town just to show yourselves, so that they'll know you won't have had any hand in the hold-up. We won't be suspected. There'll be a grand hunt all over the country, and, meanwhile, Morgan and whatever friends he has with him will be resting safely in this here cache.

"When the time's up to let 'em out, after the million is paid, we blindfold them some night, and ride with them to the middle of the Bad Lands before turning them loose. They won't know where they come from, and no one could ever find this cache. You and the boys wear masks when you hold us up, and we'll blindfold the party before taking 'em to the cache. You act your part all right, and I'll act mine all right, and the whole thing will be as soft as plug tobacco. Then, if any hitch should come—which there won't—I've got a pull, all right. There ain't the least danger. You and the boys split a few hundred thousand, and I get some for myself."

"*Si, si,*" said Spanish Joe, nodding his head. "And this man McGloin, he come——"

"Hush!" cautioned Cash, half-looking around. "No names, even here!"

"Why he come here?" asked the other, nodding assent to the caution.

"You have me!" said Cash, with a shrug. "Mebbe he wants to see the thing go off all right. Mebbe he's in the party, and thinks it best to be captured, too, with the others. Can't tell. He sent the message through Injun Pete."

The other was silent, digging speculatively at the soft earth with his bowie-knife.

"Of course, you know best, capitan, but I do not like that Indian."

"Oh, he's straight goods, all right," observed Cash idly. "Anyway, we have him here. He can't do any harm."

"I saw him when the sun was shining on his face—when his blanket was off," pursued Spanish Joe equably. "He has queer eyes for an Indian. To me, they seem gray. I may be wrong."

"Gray eyes in an Indian," mused Cash slowly. "Come, Joe, you're color-blind. Injun Pete is an out-and-out Sioux, or I'm a sky-pilot! I've seen too many of 'em before this. He has the brand. Besides, he gave me the message from the man we know of, right enough. He may be half-breed. You're all off."

"P'r'aps," said the other. But his voice was still suspicious.

The two began to discuss other things, and Nick Carter, having learned all he wished, prepared to crawl back to his original place. He had been so engrossed in the foregoing conversation that, for once, his habitual caution had been momentarily forgotten. He had ceased to look at the two guards standing in the shadows by the

pivot rock. This slight oversight now nearly proved his undoing.

He had just about determined to retrace his tracks from the camp-fire, when a startling incident occurred. It was well for him that he had not made the first move of his retreat. For, as he lay there, a voice suddenly came from the rear.

"Don't move," it said harshly, "or I'll blow your head loose!"

Even as the voice spoke, Nick Carter half-glanced up involuntarily to where the two guards had been standing. One of them had disappeared. In an instant he recognized the fact that his absence from his original position had been noted, and that one of the pickets had crept round in the shadow of the encircling rock, crept up behind him, and was now leveling his rifle at his prostrate form.

There was but one thing to do. His only chance was to feign sleep. At the words of the guard, Cash Dagget and Spanish Joe leaped to their feet, their guns in hand. Nick Carter lay like a log, his head wrapped in his blanket.

"What's this?" asked Cash savagely, peering past the glowing embers of the dying fire to where the guard stood with leveled rifle. For a moment it appeared to him as if a mutiny had occurred.

Then he saw that the rifle was not aimed at him, but at a dark shadow on the ground.

"Injun Pete," said the guard significantly. "He lay down five yards back. I only missed him now."

Cash's answer was to leap across the camp-fire, and, giving Nick Carter a resounding kick in the ribs. The detective gritted his teeth, but made no sign.

"He's asleep," said Cash. "Did you see him move?" he added to the guard. "Did he crawl here, or walk, like a man?"

The guard had to admit that he had not seen him change his position. Cash gave the huddled figure in the Navajo blanket another kick. Nick Carter sat up suddenly, then rose to his feet, making a motion of drawing his knife.

"Who kick?" he demanded fiercely, with all the red man's outraged dignity. "No man kick Injun Pete! I McGloin's friend!"

This unexpectedly hostile and resentful attitude took Cash and his men aback. Nick Carter thoroughly appreciated the advantage of assuming a bold exterior in a tight place.

"We was merely wanting to know how you traveled from there to here," said Cash dryly, pointing to the fire.

"Me travel always with legs," replied the detective curtly. "Me cold. Me go to fire. Me sleep. Me kicked in ribs. Me Mc'loin's friend."

"Well, we don't do no traveling by moonlight in this joint," replied Cash sourly. "Understand that, Mr. Injun. You take your orders from me, even if you are McGloin's friend."

Before Nick Carter could reply, something occurred that, for the moment, focused the attention of the party in another direction.

The hoot of an owl, twice repeated softly, was heard from the defile that led to the pivot rock.

The men jumped to their feet, those who were sleeping, and Cash straightened up. Then, shading his mouth with his hand, to Nick Carter's astonishment, he softly echoed the owl's call.

"That's McGloin himself, boys. Escort him in, boys," he said quietly. "He's come ahead of time. There's something doing."

CHAPTER V.

"ACE" M'GLOIN.

Nick Carter was placed in one of the most unenviable positions in his whole career. McGloin, the man who was not supposed to arrive till Friday, three days from then, as Chief Wilkie's message had assured him, was even now coming through the defile.

And he, Injun Pete, was supposed to be this influential man's messenger and tool. He could not fathom why Chief Wilkie had sent him so misleading a message, even as he did not care to interpret the dark glances Cash Dagget bestowed upon him across the camp-fire.

The premature arrival of McGloin had brought Spanish Joe's words to the outlaw's mind, and fully awakened his suspicions.

If this were a mere fictitious story, and not the narrative rehearsing a true experience of a well-known detective, Nick Carter would have, at this crucial moment in his career, discovered an air-ship in some out-of-the-way corner of the cache, and so sailed safely away from the impending meeting with McGloin; perhaps he might have confounded his enemies with an equally absurd method.

But, being a true and simple record, such miracles did not happen. There was no possible escape for the detective. He was hemmed in on all sides, and Cash himself, with drawn Colt, was eying him watchfully.

Apparently, there was no way out, and Nick Carter softly drew back his blanket, in order to get the more readily at his revolver and knife. With his celerity on the "draw," and his deadly marksmanship, he calculated that he would make things considerably interesting.

Perhaps he might even succeed in winning his way to the pivot rock. One thing, he would not be taken prisoner. He knew the caliber of the enemies he was dealing with.

Cash hated him—the tenderfoot liver-pill doctor. McGloin hated him, and had often sworn to "fix" him, for

Nick Carter had made it exceedingly interesting in the past for that influential and criminal gentleman.

And so Injun Pete stood stolidly at the fire, his hand concealed by the blanket, on the butt of his Colt. He was waiting for McGloin's approach, waiting for his opportunity.

But fate decreed that Nick Carter was not to fight against so many odds—not that night, at any rate.

Another moment, and "Ace" McGloin, escorted by two of Cash's men, joined the circle at the camp-fire. Though familiar with his face, Nick Carter now at first had some difficulty in recognizing him. Usually, he was clean-shaven, but to-night a heavy dark beard covered the lower part of his face. A black felt hat was pulled down over his forehead, and he wore a dark storm-coat and leggings.

"How did you get here, chief?" asked Cash, after an exchange of greetings. "I recognized your signal—the one we agreed on—but how did you know your way here? No one knows the secret of this cache but those present. None of my men were waiting for you at Lone Dog, for we didn't expect you till Friday." There was alarm in his voice.

If the secret of the cache became known, it was a serious state of affairs for him. When he heard McGloin's signal, he had been intensely surprised, but he naturally concluded that one of his men had returned to Lone Dog, and happened in with McGloin.

But, when the latter entered alone, this supposition was untenable. Hence his alarm.

"Well, that's queer," said McGloin slowly, in his sharp, querulous voice. "A man escorted me here, who said he belonged to your gang."

"Where is he?" asked Cash sharply.

"Why, he returned to Lone Dog. Said he was stationed there by you. Meant to say some one's spying on us, eh?" he added threateningly.

Cash lined up his men for roll-call.

"Looks that way," he said, at length, with white face. "All the boys are here. What did this man look like?"

"Tall chap," said McGloin, his voice quivering with anger. "I arrived at Lone Dog disguised this way, and asked the first man I met to find Cash Dagget for me, to bring him to the Palace Hotel. I didn't know where your hole in the wall was. This chap said he was one of your men, and offered to escort me. I thought it a piece of good luck at the time, and now I find it's one of the worst things that could have happened!"

"I don't understand it," said Cash, glowering. "Your message said you'd be here Friday, not to-night, so I had no man waiting——"

"Message!" echoed McGloin slowly. "Who brought it?"

"Your messenger, Injun Pete—an old friend of yours," said Cash, with a malignant sneer. He was glad that, at last, some one would have to bear the brunt of general ill feeling over the incident of the strange escort. He was quite sure by now that Injun Pete was an impostor. He thought savagely how he would vent his spleen upon him.

As for Nick Carter, at Cash's words he saw that his time had come, and he determined to put up the fight of his life. Before he could make the slightest movement, however, he received the greatest surprise of his life.

For "Ace" McGloin, after looking him steadily in the face for a moment, said:

"Yes; that is my messenger—Injun Pete."

At these words, Cash's face expressed the disappointment he felt, while Spanish Joe reluctantly put up his knife. Evidently, accident or coincidence, thought the detective had stepped in to save him at the crucial moment. Without a doubt, McGloin had detailed a messenger, Injun Pete, and he (Nick Carter) had successfully impersonated him without knowing he was doing so. That could be the only explanation, however far-fetched it might appear. If so, what, then, had become of the real Injun Pete?

Nick Carter puzzled over this question as McGloin drew Cash Dagget aside, and held an earnest and whispered conversation with him.

There were other questions disturbing the detective, which seemed impossible to answer. Why had Chief Wilkie sent him so misleading a message, saying McGloin would not be in Lone Dog until Friday? If it had not been a misleading message, why, then, had McGloin changed his mind and come ahead of time?

Had J. Pierpont Morgan also changed his intended time of departure? If so, Chief Wilkie would have wired on to the Lone Dog, to apprise Nick Carter of the fact. Perhaps there was a message waiting there for him now. He must manage somehow to leave the cache and see Bill Hoover. But how could he, imprisoned as he was? And then the most paramount of all questions, and one which was evidently disturbing McGloin and his creatures greatly, was the one, Who was the mysterious stranger who had escorted the former gentleman to the cache?

As Cash had truly boasted, the secret of the whereabouts of the cache was known only to those present. The fact that an outsider shared the secret was cause for great suspicion and fear. How could he have learned but from one of Cash's men? Consequently, the seed of distrust and suspicion was sown in the camp, and each man eyed his neighbor distrustfully, and Cash eyed them all.

McGloin and Cash were palpably nervous and greatly exercised over the matter.

As Nick Carter stood stolidly by the camp-fire, turning over the foregoing questions in his mind, and en-

deavoring to find the best plan to leave the cache temporarily, in order to ascertain whether or not Chief Wilkie had sent him another message to the Lone Dog Hotel, he was approached by "Ace" McGloin and Cash.

"Injun Pete," said the former peremptorily, "I want you to take your bronco, ride into Lone Dog, and send this wire at the nearest telegraph office. It's to New York. Understand?"

"Heap good," said Injun Pete.

He felt very kindly toward fate that night. It had come forward to help him just when he most required it. Plainly, luck was on his side. Now not only would he be able to go to the Lone Dog Hotel, and inquire about the message, but he could find out what the message he carried contained, and thus ascertain McGloin's intentions.

Another minute, and he was leading his wiry bronco through the narrow defile that led to the pivot rock. He mounted, and set out on his two-mile ride to Lone Dog.

Things were going very well with him. Nick Carter, perhaps, would not have been so happy if he had known that Spanish Joe dogged his horse's footsteps the entire distance. Nor would it have pleased him to know that "Ace" McGloin and Cash Dagget were laughing grimly, and exchanging observations regarding himself.

CHAPTER VI.

INJUN PETE THE SECOND.

But Nick Carter had not earned his great reputation as one of the world's famous detectives for nothing. His instincts were of the most acute character, and his faculties trained to the highest possible state of perfection.

Events had happened with such rapidity, and curious sequence, during the past twenty-four hours that he had not had time to collect his thoughts and give the several knotty problems that confronted him his earnest attention. The lonely, moonlit ride to Lone Dog now afforded him this welcome opportunity of concentration. And, as he rehearsed the foregoing events in the cache, the more he considered, the less he liked their appearance.

What had seemed probable to him in the first flush of action now appeared very improbable. Was it possible there could be a second Injun Pete? Possible that a message from McGloin, identical with the one he, Nick Carter, had manufactured on the spur of the moment, was to be delivered to Cash? No; it was not possible.

The name Injun Pete, and the message he, Nick Carter, had invented. It was not within the bounds of possibility that they had been stolen. Why, then, had McGloin vouched for the genuineness of his messenger? The only answer was that he had recognized Nick Carter.

But was that possible, disguised as he was, and shrouded by darkness? The answer to this led the detective to another discovery in his process of reasoning. No; he could not have been recognized. Still, he *must* have been.

What was the answer to this seeming paradox? Simply that McGloin had learned that Nick Carter was impersonating an Indian in order to gain admittance to the cache. This fact would explain McGloin's hurried arrival. He had come to warn Cash. Why, then, had he permitted Nick Carter to escape from the cache? Supported him in his deception? The faintest of sounds came to the ears of the detective from his rear. At once he knew what it was—the slight noise made by a stone displaced. None but his trained ears could have heard it, for Spanish Joe, who was trailing him, was a master hand at the game. Nick Carter rode on, apparently unheeding.

"That's the answer," he said grimly to himself. "They gave me this message on purpose. I'll bet it's a fake. If I'm not very much mistaken, McGloin and Cash are frightened over the incident of the mysterious escort. They think he is a pal of mine, and that I will ride to him now, to let him know what happened in the cache. Then they will bag us both. They can't afford to let any one escape who knows the secret of the cache, or the kidnaping plot. That's the answer, and now I must prepare another one. McGloin knows who I am, and he's told Cash, and he's pretending he doesn't, just to give me an opportunity to lead them to this mysterious escort who they think is a pal of mine."

Though he had not heard another sound, Nick understood perfectly that he was still being trailed. He did not know how many were following him. It was essential that he find out. He was busy devising the means, when suddenly he found it, ready to hand.

The trail, high rocks to the north, a deep abyss to the south, made a sharp turn to the right just ahead of him. A huge boulder jutted out onto the path at this turn. As he rounded it, Nick Carter was for a moment hidden from his pursuer. In that moment he swung lightly from his bronco, gave it a slight cut with his quirt, and hid himself behind the shelter of the boulder, revolver in hand. His horse trotted on down the pass, its hoof-beats echoing distinctly. The detective knew that it would come to a halt of its own accord after it had traversed a certain distance.

Meanwhile, he waited, gun in hand, behind the rock. The echoing hoof-beats of his riderless horse would be distinctly heard by his trailer, or trailers, who would follow unsuspiciously, thinking that the animal still bore their quarry.

Nick Carter waited in the shadows, his nerves strung

to the highest tension. The moon lighted up that part of the trail ahead of him. He knew his trailer would be afoot, not on horseback. The moments passed in silence. Still no sound came to his ear from the rear. And then Nick Carter suddenly became aware that there was something moving on the trail before him. A shadow was flitting silently toward him up the moonlit path.

Nick gripped his gun. Who was this newcomer? Who could he be? Another minute, and, to the detective's astonishment, the shadow, as it approached noiselessly, resolved itself into the figure of a big Indian, in a stooping position, half-running, half-walking, with all the tireless energy and rapidity of the trained plainsman. As it drew abreast of Nick's hiding-place, and then slipped silently past, the detective was further astonished to discover that this Indian was dressed identically the same as himself. In short, he was a second, and somewhat larger, edition of Injun Pete. The same old slouch hat, faded cavalry trousers, and bright Navajo blanket adorned him.

"Have I got 'em?" asked Nick of himself, with a bewildered air. "Another Injun Pete! Great Scott!" he added, as an idea came to him; "was McGloin really speaking the truth, after all, and was there a real Injun Pete his messenger? And is that Indian who has just passed the real one, after all? If so, then my suspicions are all wrong, and I am all at sea. But why, then, was I followed?"

This called to his mind the fact that his pursuer had not put in an appearance.

"That Indian must have met him on the trail—he couldn't avoid it. If he is the real Injun Pete, then he has gone back with my trailer. The best way is to find out, so here goes."

Nick Carter slipped from behind his boulder and retraced his steps along the narrow path, keeping well in the shadows. He had not gone more than a few yards, when he gave vent to an exclamation.

Far down the trail, in the direction of the outlaws' cache, were two figures. Nick Carter readily recognized them in the moonlight. One was that of the Indian who had just passed him. The other a man whom the detective surmised to be Spanish Joe.

"This grows interesting!" said Nick grimly, as he again took up the trail to Lone Dog. "It seems there is a real Injun Pete, after all. And yet I can't believe it. It doesn't look all right to me. And that Indian passed me loose down the trail, and he never said anything. I must go to the Lone Dog, find out if Chief Wilkie has sent me another message, and then think this thing over."

He found his bronco lazily nibbling the sparse wire grass, and, without further adventure of any kind, rode into the deserted streets of Lone Dog, and made his way to the hostelry by that name, and presided over by the genial and patriotic Bill Hoover. He also took the precaution to find out that he was not followed.

The barroom of the Lone Dog was deserted when Nick, after stabling his bronco at the rear, entered. He looked around for Bill Hoover, expecting to see him at his usual stand behind the bar. But Hoover was not there. In his place was a stolid-looking German.

"Where Bill Hoover?" asked Nick Carter, still assuming the guise of Injun Pete.

"Don't know," said the bartender. "Maybe off on a bust. He gives me charge of the bar whenever he goes off."

"Did he leave any sign for me—Injun Pete?" asked Nick Carter.

"So you're Injun Pete? Yes; he left this." The bartender handed over an envelope. Nick Carter opened it. Inside was a sealed telegram, addressed to N. Carter, Lone Dog Hotel, Lone Dog, Wyoming. There was also a note from Bill Hoover. The detective read the telegram first. Its contents were startling. It was from Chief Wilkie, and, deciphered, it read:

"Morgan and McGloin leave New York this morning."

"There is something wrong here!" muttered Nick to himself. "He says nothing of sending a previous message, or the reason why Morgan changed his mind. Then the great financier must now be in Lone Dog, if McGloin has arrived."

He turned and questioned the bartender. But, if Morgan had arrived in Lone Dog, it was not yet known. This seemed impossible. A sudden suspicion came to Nick Carter. Might not the first message he had received from Chief Wilkie been a forgery? Might not the one he now held be the only one the head of the secret service had sent? The date for Morgan's arrival in Lone Dog might have been to-day, not Friday, and some one had sent him the false message in order to throw him off the track. Who, then, had sent it? If McGloin knew that Nick Carter was on his trail, he might have sent it. But, if McGloin knew who he was, why had he let him escape? That brought Injun Pete into the question again. Nick Carter could only have escaped from the cache because there was a real Injun Pete, and McGloin had mistaken the detective for him. In that case, the arrival of the real Indian at the cache would apprise McGloin and Cash Dagget of the fact that they had been hoodwinked. But the main question now was, Where was Morgan?

Then, for the first time, he thought of the note Bill Hoover had enclosed in the envelope. Perhaps it might throw some light on the muddled condition of things. He opened it, and read it. It ran:

"DEER MISTER CARTER: The wire I am enclosing came for you a half-hour after you had left. I am leav-

ing it here, in kase you sh'u'd come for it. Dutch Fritz, the barkeep, is O. K. You kan trust him. Yours infernally, BILL HOOVER."

Nick Carter smiled, despite his worry.

"I think Bill means fraternally, not infernally," he mused. "He leaves me as much in the dark as ever. Surely, if he had heard anything about Morgan's arrival in Lone Dog, he would have communicated it to me. Perhaps he was afraid. I'm glad I can trust Dutch Fritz. I'll change my clothes, and phone to Chief Wilkie, in order to see if this reported arrival of the financier is a hoax. Things are considerably mixed up, it seems to me."

Dutch Fritz readily gave him the key of his room, without surprise of any kind, and shortly afterward Nick Carter, in ordinary civilian clothes, but with a huge red beard, enveloping his face, left the Lone Dog for the nearest long-distance telephone-booth.

It was some time before he got the secret service bureau on the wire, but at last he heard Chief Wilkie's voice coming to him through the miles of space. Their conversation was short and to the point.

It confirmed Nick Carter in his suspicions. Chief Wilkie had sent but one message—the one Nick had just received at the Lone Dog. What was more startling, Morgan had left New York that morning, en route to Wyoming. To Chief Wilkie Nick Carter said nothing regarding his suspicions or adventures. He merely said that the financier had not arrived so far. Chief Wilkie had advised the postponement of the trip and apprised Morgan of his danger. It was Nick Carter who had decided to have the bluff played out. It was a lone hand he was playing, and at present it would seem that the cards were against him. But he had faith in his ability, and he vowed that he would yet turn the winning trick, despite McGloin, Cash Dagget, and his entire band.

The question now was to find Morgan.

CHAPTER VII.

NICK CARTER DISCOVERS THE REAL PLOT.

As Nick Carter left the telephone office, he remembered, for the first time, that the message "Ace" McGloin had entrusted him with was still in his pocket, where he had been transferred from his Indian costume, and that he had not had time to look at it. If McGloin really thought Lame Injun Pete, his messenger, as everything pointed that he did, then this telegraph message to New York might furnish him with some clue as to the whereabouts of Morgan.

Stopping under a near-by lamp, he unfolded the message, and read it. It was a cryptic cypher, and, try how he might, applying all his vast knowledge regarding cipher codes, the great detective could make nothing of it. It was a complete tangle, without head or tail, sense of any kind. What was more, to his great surprise, the address was: "Nicholas Carter, Secret Service Bureau, New York." The strange, meaningless message was to himself.

"This is the toughest proposition I was ever up against," mused Nick to himself. "What is McGloin sending me a message in cipher for? Me, who he hates like poison, whom he has sworn to get 'square' with many a time? It looks very queer, to say the least."

Standing there under the lamp, he rehearsed the foregoing events since his arrival at Lone Dog. He remembered how, at New York, he first became aware of the plot to kidnap the financier, that plot which had led to such a tangled skein. It had been pure luck. At the time he had almost completed a difficult case against this very "Ace" McGloin himself, a huge political bribery plot, which he had unearthed, and which would cause a great sensation throughout the nation when the facts were known.

Nick Carter had even kept the secret of this stupendous theft from Chief Wilkie, preferring to have everything complete, even to the most minute detail, before taking the necessary steps for exposure and prosecution.

With a foe like McGloin, he could not afford to make the slightest error. It was this case that first acquainted Nick Carter with the fact that Cash Dagget was one of McGloin's tools, for he had ascertained that Cash was considerably implicated in the bribery and intimidation charges—to such an extent that he would be an invaluable witness.

As has been before stated, Nick knew of Cash before, but only in his capacity as general factotum for McGloin while in Boston. He had lost track of him when the bad man had gone West, and this unearthing of his name now in connection with the bribery charges brought him to mind.

Nick, with the case almost completed, determined to go to Wyoming, and hunt up Cash Dagget, force a con-

learn from him, and obtain the more complicated and essential phases of the case from him.

But that very night something occurred which, for the time being, focused his attention on a more pressing matter. He was dining in a well known restaurant; by chance, his table was in a corner of the room, sheltered by a huge palm. Two men entered, and took the table just beyond the one occupied by Nick Carter. The detective could not help overhearing their conversation. The men could not observe him.

These two men Nick recognized as Ace McGloin and one of his henchmen, and their conversation was the kidnaping plot of J. Pierpont Morgan. Nick Carter learned just enough to make him aware that it was to take place while the financier was on his trip in Wyoming. It was thus that he resolved to kill two birds with one stone. He would go to Wyoming, as he had originally intended doing, and now, as well as unearthing Cash Dagget, he would get the inside details regarding the great plot.

Nick Carter thought over the foregoing brief synopsis of the case, as he leaned against the lamp post. There were certainly enough phases to puzzle the most acute mind. And, as the detective brought all his mental qualities and intuition to bear upon them, suddenly a vast suspicion shot through him, which, for the moment, gave him almost as great a physical shock as that imparted by an electric battery.

The curious hodge-podge of events could be easily explained in one way, viz.: What if the entire plot to kidnap the financier was a fabrication? What if it was but an elaborate scheme to entice him, Nick Carter, out to the wilds of Wyoming, away from all possible help, unknown to every one by his disguise, and there to make away with him? What if McGloin had concocted the whole scheme; knew that his enemy was sitting behind the palm tree that night in the Washington restaurant, and purposely let him overhear the essential parts of the league plan, in order to entrap him? It was all very plausible—too plausible for comfort.

The more Nick Carter thought of it, the more he felt assured that he was on the right solution of the mystery. McGloin banked on his liking at the bait; had known that the great detective, with a justifiable pride in his own prowess, would face the matter alone. Thus, with Nick Carter alone in Wyoming, under disguise, there would be no exigency if he should suddenly disappear. Simply "N. Carter, a rancher-man," would have returned to Texas.

The diabolical completeness of the scheme staggered Nick Carter for a moment as he thought of it. Why had it not occurred to him before? First, because he had never given McGloin quite the credit of being able to hatch so subtle and ingenious a plot: and, secondly, because, in his resentment at the supposed danger the New York banker was in, he quite forgot that McGloin might seek to do him harm, as he had often sworn to do.

Yes: and that brought up another possibility. Had McGloin become aware of the fact that he, Nick Carter, was about to expose him as a national corruptionist and intimidator? That, then, could explain why it had become paramount to hasten his vengeance upon the detective, and thus silence him effectually before he could publish the shameful facts broadcast.

"I've struck oil at last," mused Nick grimly, as he summed up the obvious conclusions to the foregoing. "It brings me back to my first suspicion. McGloin and Dagget let me escape from that cache on purpose. McGloin knew who I was all the time, and told Cash. They let me walk out simply because they thought the man who escorted McGloin was a pal of mine, and they wanted us both, knowing it would never do to have the secret of the cache leak out. But say, then, was I not followed all the way? Why did Spanish Joe go back with that Indian? By Jove," he exclaimed suddenly, "what a fool I've been! Why didn't I think of it before? I'll bet Spanish Joe thought that Indian was me. We were dressed alike. He thought I had returned for something, and, as he believed, trailed me back to the cache. But, then, who on earth is that other Indian? And what shall be my next move?" He revolved these two questions in his mind as he slowly made his way back to the Lone Dog Hotel.

"Perhaps Bill Hoover is back by now," he mused. "I've got McGloin and his men just where I want them, and they cannot escape me now."

A newsboy was selling the latest edition of the town paper, and Nick Carter idly bought one as he pursued his way. He glanced at the front page. It was staring at him in big type on the front page. "Morgan's train, en route for Lone Dog, Wyoming, derailed at Mud Creek. No one hurt." The article went on to say that Morgan, in view of the accident, had abandoned his pro-

posed trip and had returned by an early train to New York.

"This corroborates my suspicions," said Nick to himself. "It was all a put-up job. Well, I have learned of the banker's whereabouts. It seems the joke is on me, but I think it will be on Cash and McGloin before I get through with them. It has not been a wild-goose chase for me entirely. I'll still get them on that bribery and intimidation charge, and it will make enough trouble for them — Hello," he broke off, in surprise, "here's the very Indian that passed me on the trail coming down the line. I must find out who he is."

In fact, an Indian, dressed as the one described, was coming toward Nick Carter down the narrow, darkened street. He seemed to be a stranger in the town.

"How!" he said, stopping opposite the detective. "Me a stranger in Lone Dog. Does white man know a brother called Carter?"

"He does," said Nick. It must be remembered that the detective was disguised by the huge red beard and ordinary citizen's clothes.

"Good," said the Indian. "Can white man bring me to him?"

"What's your business?" asked Nick curtly.

"Business for Carter," answered the wily Indian.

"Tote along with me, and I'll find him for you," returned the detective.

They walked in silence to the Lone Dog Hotel. Nick Carter was busy with this new problem.

Bill Hoover had not returned to the Lone Dog, and Nick ushered the Indian into a small room adjoining the barroom. The latter was deserted, owing to the lateness of the hour, except for the stolid German, Dutch Fritz, who manifested no surprise at Nick's strange companion. Then the detective left the room, saying he would tell his friend Carter that——

"By the way," he asked, "who shall I say wishes to see him? What's your brand?"

"Me Injun Pete," said the other stolidly.

"Whew," thought Nick, going to his room to assume the dress of N. Carter, the Texas ranchman, "there seems to be any number of Injun Petes floating round. Who is this one, and what can he want?"

Meanwhile, this second Injun Pete sat stolidly in the little room by a small table, waiting for the arrival of "N. Carter."

Perhaps the great detective would have been more cautious had he known that behind the brown walnut stain on Injun Pete's wooden face lay the sallow skin and shifty eyes of Spanish Joe.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIGHT IN THE LONE DOG HOTEL.

"I am N. Carter," said Nick Carter, entering the room dressed as the Texas ranchman. "What is it I can do for you?"

He seated himself at the table opposite the supposed Injun Pete. The latter's face was in the shadows and well concealed by the dilapidated Stetson sombrero. But, as clever an actor as Spanish Joe was, his own swarthy skin and aquiline face being especially fitted for the rôle of an Indian, he was not confronting an amateur, but one who was a past master in the art of simulation and disguise. We are known by our tricks of manner, however we may endeavor to hide our identity under false pretenses.

"I come," answered the bogus Injun Pete, "to help you kill Cash Dagget. I know he your enemy. He my enemy, too. He insult me. He and McGloin kick me out of cache because I no bring the message in time." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and it seemed to come away wet with venom. But that movement was characteristic of Spanish Joe, that slow wiping of the mouth with the thumb tucked under the first finger, and Nick Carter, who had been endeavoring to fathom the other's disguise, suddenly came upon the truth. His face gave no sign, however.

"That's too bad, Pete," he said lazily. "But how did you know that I also hated McGloin and Dagget?"

"Me in McGloin's pay. Me know all about plot. Me square them."

"Well, go ahead. But where do I come in? I don't see how I can help you."

"You can. Look out of window there." He pointed to a window at one side of the table.

Somewhat surprised at this command, and curious to know how it concerned himself, Nick rose from the table and looked out of the darkened window. In an instant, the minute his back was turned, Spanish Joe came to his feet like a panther, a long bowie-knife in his hand.

Without a sound, or the slightest warning, he sprang straight on Nick Carter's defenseless back. But Spanish Joe did not know, perhaps, that he was tackling one of the strongest men in the world—a man who had experi-

enced many dangers. Even as he alighted like a wild-cat upon the detective's broad back, Nick flung round, catching the upraised hand in a grip of steel.

A twist of his wrist and the bones of Spanish Joe's forearm cracked audibly, the knife falling harmlessly to the floor. Then, with the other hand, Nick caught him by the throat, and, with a heave, flung him half-strangled across the room, where he fell over a table and then crashed to the floor.

Another second, and Dutch Fritz, the barkeeper, had rushed into the room, attracted by the scuffle, a bung-starter in one hand.

"I'll k'nipple him," he cried, starting for the insensible Spanish Joe.

Before Nick could reply, a shot sounded outside, the window at which Nick had been standing crashed in fragments to the floor, and a bullet cut past the detective's ear and buried itself in Dutch Fritz's shoulder.

Instantly Nick had dropped to the floor, signaling the wounded barkeeper to do likewise. Then Nick drew his Colt and with one shot smashed the hanging lamp in the room, leaving it in darkness. Through the open door that led to the barroom the light from that room cut a wide swath of yellow. Nick and the wounded barkeeper were in darkness, but the barroom was fully lighted.

Silence ensued. Ten minutes passed, and then footsteps were heard softly walking away from the window. Then, inch by inch, the barroom door that led into the primitive street was seen to slowly open. It finally swung entirely back with a bang. Nick, lying at full length on the floor of the darkened inner room, covered the door with both his guns.

Then a voice came from out the darkness outside—a hoarse, raucous voice. It was Cash Dagget.

"Come out, tenderfoot liver-pill doctor, and play the man, if you can. I've got you dead to rights this time. Come out, and I'll show you a few fancy steps in dancing. It's no good playing possum," he added viciously, as Nick was silent, "for I seen you at the window."

Nick Carter now recognized to the full Spanish Joe's request to step to the window. By doing so, he had not only given him the opportunity to knife him, but had conveyed to Cash Dagget, and possibly some of his men, that the Spaniard had run his victim to earth.

Suddenly another sound came to Nick—a sound close at hand. There was a soft thud and then the horrible noises of a man slowly strangling to death.

Spanish Joe had recovered consciousness, crawled across the floor with all the cunning of his race, and sprung upon the back of the wounded Dutch Fritz, mistaking him in the darkness for Nick Carter. There was no time to lose if the faithful barkeeper's life was to be saved.

Wounded as he was, he could put up but a feeble defense against the tigerlike strength and ferocity of the enraged Spaniard. Nick heard the German's gasps growing feebler and feebler. Without making the slightest sound, he crawled across the floor in the direction of the deadly and silent combat.

He had almost reached the struggling men when some sixth sense must have warned the Spaniard of the approach of this new foe. With a snarl, he released his death-clutch on the German's throat and sprang straight at the detective, outlined dimly in the room's gloom.

Nick waited for him coolly; then his heavy Colt crashed butt foremost on the other's high forehead, and without a sound Spanish Joe thudded across the half-strangled barkeeper.

Almost instantly a fusillade of shots sounded, and the bullets came humming through the broken window and the barroom door. Nick took up his original position facing the door, his guns in either hand. Then the doorway was blocked up for a moment as two men sprang into the barroom, their guns above their heads ready for instant use. They scattered, seeking shelter. But Nick's Colts had been before them. Two shots rang out almost as one, and the men fell back through the door—one with the blood streaming down his shoulder, the other with a crippled leg.

"I can keep this up as long as they can," said Nick, grimly, to himself. "They'll try the window next."

He was right. They tried the window, and received two more bullet-wounds for their pains. Nick knew he was in for a long siege if he did not devise some means of escape.

The town was practically run by Cash Dagget, who was feared to an acute degree. When it became known that he was merely trying to "smoke out" a tenderfoot who had insulted him grievously by compelling him to dance, the town would not dare do anything, however it might feel.

Added to this, there was the fact that Bill Hoover would inevitably return from his "bust" and walk into

Cash Dagget. Cash had sworn to kill him at the first opportunity. Cash was using Nick's disguise against him with devilish cunning. To Lone Dog, with the exception of Hoover, he was merely N. Carter, a Texas ranchman who had been foolhardy enough to insult Cash Dagget. The consequences would be his own, not Lone Dog's.

Nick thought over all these facts and the added one of Hoover's return. He had liked Hoover for his staunch devotion and manliness. He would not like to see him shot down in cold blood if a little daring would save him.

He must devise some means of escape from this trap. Otherwise, he would be starved out. He would have been perfectly willing to have accepted Cash Dagget's challenge for a "gun-fight," but he well knew that the minute he stepped into the light of the barroom he would have been the target for not only Cash's hidden guns, but the guns of his men. Again, he had McGloin to watch out for, as well as his tool.

Silence ensued, however. Cash and his men were either planning some new deviltry, or merely waiting until Nick ventured out of hiding. As Nick turned his brain with the problem in hand, suddenly an idea came to him which, should by any possibility find a working, was absolutely sound. He would dress himself in the Indian costume of Spanish Joe, and, as Spanish Joe, calmly join Cash Dagget and his band. There were other phases of the plan which he would successfully carry into effect. Dagget knew that Spanish Joe was inside, but, no doubt, believed that Nick Carter had killed him. Well, Nick Carter would resurrect him again.

In a few minutes Nick had noiselessly divested the still unconscious Spaniard of the essential portions of his Indian costume, dressing the other in the leather chaps, etc., of the Texas ranchman.

As Nick was wrapping the bright Navajo blanket about him, he made a startling discovery. The light from the barroom came faintly through the doorway, and it fell upon a small piece of paper pinned to the bottom of the blanket, and at the back, where it could not have been noticed by Spanish Joe. A curious premonition of impending peril came to Nick, as he unpinned and read it. It ran:

"I am in the cache, and they are going to torture me to death. I enclose you and Cash to the cache, believing I am in Lone Dog's hut and that you were in danger. A message came for you from New York, and I guided the man with the black beard to the cache, because I thought I cud give you the message. I couldn't. Then I dressed as Injun Pete, thinking I cud pass for you, and so tell you of the message. They would think I was the rele messanger, and I cud help you. I got in the cache, all rite, but they found who I was, and are going to kill me. I pinned this to Spanish Joe, who is after you. Don't mind me, but look out for yourself.

"B. H."

Nick Carter read the strange message through twice.

"True as steel!" he said, his hands clenching. "Bill, then, was the mysterious escort, and the Indian I met on the trail. If I had only spoken to him! This has been his "bust"—to take his life in his hands for the purpose of helping me. And he says: 'Don't mind me, but look out for yourself.'" Nick Carter's face grew hard and stern.

"I've many counts against Cash Dagget and 'Ace' McGloin," he said grimly to himself; "but, if they so much as lay a finger on Bill Hoover, I'll take justice in my own hands! Now for the cache! That gang will find that Nick Carter can fight as savagely for a true friend as he can for his country, or himself! Bill shall not suffer through me!"

Nick Carter had hardly uttered these words to himself when the darkness of the room was illuminated for a second by a bright flash. The report of a heavy revolver rang out, and the great detective pitched headforemost to the floor.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SNAKE TORTURE.

It was, indeed, Bill Hoover who, in the guise of a corner hanger on, had escorted McGloin to the cache, his purpose being, as he intimated in the letter, to discover the whereabouts of the mysterious hiding-place which had so long defied the curious eyes of Lone Dog, that he might know where to find the great detective, if he was in danger.

Nick Carter's frank greeting to the simple hotel-owner had, as Bill Hoover termed it, "put a diamond hitch on his heart." But Hoover's exploit had been in vain, as he could not gain entrance to the cache.

He had, therefore, determined upon the guise of Injun Pete. He did not think of the danger he ran. All he wanted was to be near Nick Carter, and to share whatever dangers might arise. No doubt it was a foolish move on his part, as he was almost sure to be discov-

ered. However, he thought that McGloin had really sent a messenger, and he did not know that the black-bearded man whom he had escorted was, in truth, McGloin himself. Therefore, he would have had only Cash Dagget to hoodwink. Nor did he know that the messenger scheme was an entire fabrication.

He had thought Nick Carter was merely making use of a fact to serve his purpose. Unknown to all, even the faithful Dutch Fritz, he had dressed in the Indian costume, and left the Lone Dog by a back way, giving out to the barkeeper that he was going on a "bust."

When he met Spanish Joe on the trail, and the latter, at first taking him for Nick Carter, had let him enter the cache, Hoover congratulated himself on his scheme. But he soon found that Nick Carter was absent. McGloin and Cash were deceived at first regarding Hoover's identity, taking him for the disguised detective; but when the former questioned him regarding the telegraph message, Bill Hoover not being able to simulate or act anything like Nick Carter, his identity speedily became known. Dagget and McGloin were in high feather at this capture, for, as well as Cash bearing a grudge against the hotel-keeper, a grudge he would like to settle, both he and McGloin were assured that Hoover was the mysterious escort, and that he had been working in concert with Nick Carter. Therefore, they had bagged the only one who, outside themselves and the detective, knew the location of the cache.

But, however they might feel elated over this turn of luck, they were correspondingly enraged that Nick Carter had escaped them. They swore at Spanish Joe savagely for allowing him to escape. It was then that McGloin suggested that Spanish Joe dress himself as Injun Pete, and ferret out the detective—killing him, if he could not persuade him, by some subterfuge, to return to the cache. As they thought that Nick Carter was aware of Hoover's disguise, they thought it likely that Injun Pete could approach him without suspicion. Cash Dagget and some of his men left the cache with the Spaniard. They had planned, as Nick later surmised, that Injun Pete, by some signal, would apprise his followers of the fact that he had succeeded in running down their quarry. Spanish Joe had trailed Nick to the telegraph office, while Cash and his men lurked about the hotel.

When they saw Nick arrive with their follower, they were not aware of his identity, as he was disguised. It was only when he showed himself at the window that they recognized him in the person of the Texas ranchman. And, as Hoover's note had said, the hotel-owner, made prisoner in the cache, had found occasion to pin the note Nick Carter received to the blanket of Spanish Joe.

Meanwhile, as the incidents recited in the foregoing chapter were taking place, Bill Hoover was being prepared to be tortured in the cache. It was necessary that he should be put out of the way, as the secret of the hiding-place was known to him. But, what was more, Hoover, on his true identity becoming known to McGloin, had put up such a terrible fight against overwhelming odds that he had earned the hatred of that estimable and enterprising gentleman.

In fact, Hoover had made McGloin and Cash the object of his attack, and, before he could be knocked senseless, he had imparted to both gentlemen a considerably damaged countenance.

So, instead of Bill being decently shot, as would have been his ordinary fate, his resistance and assault on the sacred persons of McGloin and Dagget had earned him the worst death that can be meted out to man, a death that could have been only devised by a savage, as, indeed, it was.

It was suggested by one of the band, a half-breed, who possessed all the fiendish ingenuity and cruelty of his savage forebears. To him was given the credit of suggesting that Bill Hoover be subjected to a well-known torture of the Indian—the snake torture. Accordingly, even as Nick Carter was fighting off Cash Dagget and his men in the Lone Dog Saloon, Bill Hoover was being prepared to meet a horrible death. He was stripped to the waist, and stretched out on the floor of the cache, his arms and legs spread out and attached by rawhide thongs to four stakes driven into the soft earth. The first streaks of dawn were showing over the surrounding rock, and a circle of lanterns further lighted the gruesome scene.

The men were grouped about, with interested faces, as they watched the half-breed Indian, who had pinned, with the aid of a forked stick, a gigantic diamond-back rattlesnake to the ground. Holding the snake's head firmly to the ground, the half-breed deftly cut a long slit in the squirming and quivering reptile's neck, just behind the head. Through this slit the half-breed passed a rawhide thong, similar to those that bound Hoover.

McGloin was an interested spectator at this grim play.

He had often heard of the dread Indian snake torture, but had never had the opportunity of viewing it in its full beauty.

The half-breed now carefully measured off a certain space above Hoover's head. This space was somewhat longer than the thong slipped through the slit in the neck of the now pain-maddened rattlesnake.

At the required distance a stake was driven into the ground, and the half-breed, taking infinite care to keep clear of the infuriated reptile's fangs, securely fastened it to the stake.

The audience now appreciated somewhat the fiendish ingenuity of the foregoing preparations. The rattlesnake was within three inches of Hoover's forehead. As it coiled and sprang, in its agony, at the nearest object, Hoover's head, it could not reach him, by reason of the thong. But its ejected venom spattered over the hotel-keeper's ashen face. Time and again the snake sprang forward and missed, while Hoover, by some horrible fascination, could not help looking up and measuring the three small inches that separated him from a horrible death. But the audience as yet had not appreciated the utmost depths of the half-breed's cruelty.

He had now procured a jug of water, and had seated himself on the ground, safely out of striking distance of the snake. Now he leaned over, and, with a stick in his left hand, goaded the snake to further fury. The right hand held the pitcher of water, and carefully, drop by drop, it fell on the rawhide thong that held the reptile's neck. Instantly the audience appreciated to the full this manœuver. It was in accordance with a well-known fact that rawhide, when subjected to water, will stretch. Consequently, as the water fell, drop by drop, on the thong, and the snake stretched it by striking at Hoover's head, the short three inches slowly decreased. Such was the snake torture. All the agony of the infernal regions are experienced by the victim, as by fractional inches the snake's fangs slowly approach him—to be buried at last in his quivering flesh.

"How do ye like it, eh?" asked McGloin brutally, looking down on the prostrate and helpless figure of Hoover. "No; it won't do for you to try to dodge. Your friend with the diamond head and bright eyes is bound to get you at last. A little more water, Moqui," he called to the half-breed. "It can never be said that Jim McGloin was stingy." He chuckled at his fiendish cruelty of humor as he chewed on a black cigar.

Slowly, slowly, almost imperceptibly, the thong stretched, and the snake's villainous head was nearing Hoover, who never flinched. No one but he knew the torture he was suffering, but he gave no sign. The snake now seemed to appreciate the fact that it was wasting its venom. Instead of lashing out continuously, it now waited until a certain amount of water had stretched the thong before it darted out to test the distance. Now its head, stretched to the fullest extent of the thong, was within an inch of Hoover.

"Not yet, but soon!" chuckled McGloin, on the snake's last baffled attempt. "More water, Moqui."

The half-breed grinned, and obeyed. Again the thong stretched. Once more the snake sprang and was baffled.

"Wish Cash was here to see the show," commented McGloin. "Hoover, my good and intrusive friend, you'll have as nice a mark on your face when the snake gets through with you as you gave me." He felt the black eye Hoover had given him. "This is merely a little lesson on the danger of butting in. More water, Moqui!"

Again the half-breed obeyed, with a grin. It can be said that one or two of the less case-hardened men turned away. But McGloin only smiled. As the first rays of the sun came slanting over the walls, birth of another day, it found Hoover unflinchingly confronting death. Another drop of water, and the thong would have stretched the entire distance; the snake's long-frustrated fangs would be buried again and again in Hoover's helpless face.

And already Moqui, the half-breed Indian, had raised the jug for the final death drop.

CHAPTER X.

THE DEATH OF SPANISH JOE.

The treacherous shot that had caught Nick Carter unawares and dropped him, bleeding, to the floor, with a bullet through his left arm, had not come from the window, or the door, speeded by Cash and his men; for, despite Nick's astonishment over the strange letter of Bill, Hoover, precaution was second nature to him, and not for a moment had he relaxed his vigilance on the above-mentioned sources of danger.

It was Spanish Joe who had shot him. The treacherous and implacable Spaniard had slowly recovered consciousness, and, in very fact, as Nick was divesting him of his Indian costume, was fully alive to his surroundings. Be-

ing in a weakened condition, and with all the odds against him, as the detective was bending over him, the outlaw had cunningly feigned complete coma; his fertile brain meanwhile devising a means to carry out his original intention of killing his opponent.

He had been deprived of his gun and knife; but, while Nick was reading Hoover's letter, the Spaniard noiselessly crawled to where the unconscious figure of Dutch Fritz lay, and possessed himself of the German's gun. Then he had taken careful aim at Nick Carter, and fired.

It so happened that this treacherous and cowardly move of Spanish Joe's fitted in exactly with Nick Carter's previous plan, though, in truth, he had not planned to be shot through the arm. But now, rather than ruining his means of escape, it further enhanced it.

As the Spaniard's bullet struck him, Nick dropped to the floor, and by so doing just averted another bullet from the same source, which spattered into the woodwork directly behind where he had stood a moment before.

In a second Nick's Colt had covered the prostrate Spaniard. It was no time to let mercy sway the balance. It was the life of a cowardly murderer and outlaw against the defective and Bill Hoover's. And yet Nick Carter could not bring himself to shoot down a fellow man, even though that man was of Spanish Joe's degenerate type. For an instant he hesitated.

In that instant a flash leaped toward him out of the darkness, and a bullet cut past his ear. The Spaniard was bent on murdering him. Then, and only then, Nick fired. He gaged his aim to a nicety, and the Spaniard crashed over, with a bullet through his chest. The wound was not fatal, as the detective had intended it not to be, but the Spaniard was put out of action for a considerable time. For the third time in that eventful evening, he lapsed into unconsciousness, and this time it would be a considerable period before he would regain his senses.

Then Nick jumped to his feet, and, imitating Spanish Joe's voice to a nicety, called out:

"Come on in, boys! I've done for him at last!"

He boldly walked into the barroom, and almost immediately Cash Dagget and three of his men slipped through the door, their guns ready for instant use.

"Good work!" glowered Cash, with an approving nod to the fictitious Spanish Joe. "I thought he'd cut your meat long before this. Say, you're bleeding," pointing to the detective's wounded arm. "He got you there?"

"Yes," grunted Nick, bandaging his wound. "He thought he'd done for me. I tried to knife him when he gave you the signal at the window, but he was too strong for me. I lay low, and, when his back was turned, let him have it good and strong. He's in there," laconically pointing to the inner room.

"It was beginning to look like an all-day job to me," replied Cash, helping himself to a bottle of liquor on the bar. "I'm only sore that I hadn't the satisfaction of settling him! But I'll give him something yet!"

He slipped quickly to the inner room, standing in the doorway and glowering down on the insensible figure of Spanish Joe, lying face down and dressed in the Texas ranchman's chaps. Dawn and the borrowed light from the barroom sifted into the room and fell faintly on the body.

In an instant, before Nick could divine his intention, or stop him, if he was so minded, Cash had covered the figure with his Colt. The entire seven chambers of his gun flashed out in rapid succession, and the smash, smash, smash of the heavy bullets could be heard as they riddled Spanish Joe from head to foot.

"There's my blessing!" laughed Cash brutally, calmly reloading his smoking weapon. "That's the end of a troublesome cur! I've heard a lot of hot air about Nick Carter, and his wonderful stunts, but he struck the wrong trail when he crossed Cash Dagget! It took a couple of boys like you and me to give him his finish; eh, Joe?" and he slapped Nick on the back.

Such was the end of Spanish Joe. Killed by his own comrade, who had struck mercilessly, where Nick Carter, an enemy to both, had spared.

Nick was silent, planning his next move. The fiendish act of Cash Dagget revolted him. A great hatred and loathing for this implacable being, who had neither compassion, conscience, nor honesty in his entire makeup, possessed him. All his impulses were to throw off his disguise then and there, and fight Cash Dagget and his men to a finish, man to man. But there was Bill Hoover to consider. He must get to the cache without delay. Once there, he could devise a means of escape and ultimate triumph.

"Come on," said Cash, breaking in on his reflections; "line up to the bar, and liquor up. It ain't often we have a chance to drink to the finish of a cuss like Nick

Carter! Drink up, boys; don't be afraid. We ain't paying anything. Bill Hoover's having a little heart-to-heart talk with *his* finish in the cache. And the barkeep is done up. We'll shoot up Bill's saloon, and then go back in time to see him do the pass-away!"

But, before any of the men could accept this amiable invitation, something occurred that transfixed him to the spot, and which placed Nick Carter in a new and deadly peril, and from a source as unexpected as it was secure.

"Throw up your hands!" shouted a voice savagely. "Up with them, every mother's son of you! Quick, or I'll blow your heads loose! I've got you covered, and the first man who moves will never move again!"

The voice was that of Dutch Fritz, and it came from the inner room. He was sheltered behind a table, and with his own gun and that of Spanish Joe, which Nick had laid on a table, was covering the group in the barroom, while completely protected himself.

Instantly Cash Dagget and his three followers elevated their hands, and Nick Carter unwillingly did the same.

"You thought you'd done for me!" sneered the voice of Dutch Fritz, who, by the way, was born in Wyoming, of straight American stock, and was only called Dutch Fritz because of his Germanic-looking face. "But you haven't, see? You've killed my boss' friend, Carter, here, and you're laying for the boss himself! Now I'm going to square things a little! I'm going to kill the man who killed Carter! That freak there, dressed like an Indian! After that I'll cripple the rest of you! You've broke into this place without a permit, stealing and murdering, and the law's right with me! There's been murder done here, and, instead of a lynching, there'll be a little shooting-party, which I'll boss! Stand out, you swine—you with the Indian togs! Stand out from the bunch, for I'm going to square Carter's death!"

Nick Carter stood now in as great danger from a faithful friend as he had done from an implacable and relentless foe. Dutch Fritz, taking the body of Spanish Joe, dressed as it was in the ranchman's clothes, for that of N. Carter, and not recognizing the real Nick Carter in the borrowed costume of the Spaniard, had at once, on his regaining consciousness, jumped to the obvious conclusion that the Spaniard had succeeded in killing his victim. He had immediately determined on vengeance, and, arming himself as has been described, had taken up his present coign of vantage.

At the barkeeper's command to "Stand out from the bunch!" the true character of Cash Dagget and his men was shown. Though Spanish Joe had been a comrade of theirs for years, sharing their perils and spoils, they were now anxious to sacrifice him for their common safety, instead of making an effort to save him. They cast glowering looks on the detective, who, despite his peril, saw a grim humor in the situation.

"Get away from us!" glowered Cash savagely, echoed by the men, their hands still raised above their heads. "Do you think we want to get hit, instead of you? Get away!"

But their curses were suddenly frozen on their lips with amazement and fear. For, with a sweep of his hand, Nick had swept the old sombrero from his head and the blanket from about him, and now stood revealed in the early morning sunlight, not as Spanish Joe, the disguised Injun Pete, but as Nick Carter, whom they had thought murdered. In the same movement he had drawn both guns, and now stood covering Cash and his men.

"Come on in, Fritz," he called quietly. "That's the body of Spanish Joe in that room. Nick Carter is here, and ready to take a hand in that shooting-party you spoke of!"

Another second, and Dutch Fritz had appeared in the doorway, a gun in either hand, likewise covering Cash and his men.

"Right!" he said, with a grin. "And thank Heaven for it!"

"Disarm those three men, and bind and gag them securely," said Nick quietly. "Keep up your hands, Cash, if you want to continue breathing!"

While Nick covered the followers of Cash, Dutch Fritz, with the greatest alacrity and willingness in the world, threw them on their backs, stripped them of every weapon, and securely gagged and bound them hand and foot.

Cash Dagget looked on in silence, sullen but unafraid. "S'pose your going to shoot me in cold blood!" he sneered to the great detective.

"It's what you deserve, and what you tried to do to me!" replied Nick sternly; "but my methods are not yours. There are many crimes you are guilty of, and murder is the least of them. You've talked a lot about fighting me man to man. Now I'll give you the opportunity. It won't take but a few minutes. But one of us

will leave the Lone Dog alive. Of that I assure you. Dutch Fritz will see fair play. Take your stand at that end of the room. Take your gun. Now, back your words about making me dance!"

Dutch Fritz had taken up his position behind the bar, his Colt in his hand, ready for any treachery. Nick stood at one end of the room, gun in hand. Cash at the other, nearest to the door that led to the street. The code was the code of the Western "gun-fighter." Both men were to stand back to back until Fritz gave signal: "One, two, three!" Then both men were to wheel and fire, advancing upon each other until one was killed.

There was an evil smile on Cash Dagget's lips. He had not expected such clemency. He considered it tantamount to freedom. For in all the West he had never met his match on the "draw."

Dutch Fritz, his eyes watchful, slowly commenced the fatal count.

CHAPTER XI.

BILL HOOVER'S FIGHT.

Meanwhile, as Nick Carter and Cash Dagget stood back to back in the barroom of the Lone Dog, waiting for the signal that would open their duel to the death, Bill Hoover, unknown to the detective and his friend, was facing another kind of death.

Moqui was leaning over the maddened rattlesnake that in another instant was intent on burying its fangs in Hoover's face. The hotel-owner clenched his teeth, and waited the final stroke.

He would die game, true to his code. He would not let McGloin, or one of his men, see that he was suffering torture. For to the Westerner there is no worse death than that induced by snake-bite. From his cradle up he is the implacable enemy of man's oldest foe, and he secretly fears even while loathing it.

And the bite of the diamond-back rattler, even though it puncture the flesh once, is fatal, death occurring within three hours, accompanied by all the tortures of the damned.

Before Moqui, the half-breed Indian, would give himself the pleasure of adding the last drop from the watering that would stretch the thong to its utmost limit, he still further infuriated the reptile by means of the forked stick he held. He desired it to have reached its most acute stage of fury before he would launch it on its helpless victim. This desire was quite in accord with the characteristics of his race—a half-breed being infinitely more cruel than a full-blooded Indian. Instead of combining the best qualities of the white and red races, he inherited the worst.

But this gloating, savage streak in him now was fated to prove his undoing. It was the fulfilment of the old proverb: "Grasp everything and lose all."

As he leaned forward, tantalizing the snake with the stick, grinning as the baffled reptile struck aimlessly at him, its tormentor, his foot suddenly slipped in the pool of water formed by the residue from the pitcher, and which had dripped from the thong to the ground. Moqui lost his balance. With a wild shriek, as he saw in a moment, when it was too late, his danger, he crashed forward on the snake. In a second the reptile had buried its fangs in the half-breed's face, striking furiously and like lightning again and again.

In his agony, Moqui lashed out right and left. One hand swept away the stakes that bound Hoover's arms to the ground, the other swept away the stake that likewise fastened the infuriated rattler.

Released from its restraining bond, the snake now coiled itself round the half-breed, venting all its venom on its screaming victim.

Over and over on the ground rolled Moqui, vainly endeavoring to tear the clinging enemy from him, but in vain. Meanwhile, McGloin and his men, momentarily aghast at the suddenness of the affair, stood helpless. Then, with one accord, they rushed to where Moqui lay struggling. The moment Hoover felt his bonds swept away he felt that his chance had come.

But he lay still, gathering his strength, and flexing his muscles to bring the circulation back to his arms. The moment the men and McGloin had taken their attention from him and rushed to aid their ally, Hoover sat up, unobserved in the rush of ghastly events, and slipped the bonds from his ankles and wrists.

A pile of arms, rifles and unslung cartridge-belts, lay in a heap some distance away, and Hoover, rising stealthily, slipped over to them. The men were grouped about the struggling Moqui, some endeavoring to tear the snake from him.

Then McGloin's voice rang out:

"The man's a goner, anyway!" he said harshly; "he's bound to die of the bite. Get out of the way, there; I'll end this thing right now!"

The men scattered at his command, as McGloin drew

a revolver. There came a sharp report. But McGloin, however he might be able to handle dirty political schemes, could not handle a gun. His first shot missed the wildly struggling half-breed. He fired again, and again he missed. Some of the men, despite the seriousness of the affair, could hardly repress a smile.

Once more McGloin fired, and with no better result. Then, in a fury, he threw the gun upon the ground, and stamped upon it.

"Why don't one of you men do it?" he bellowed. "I'm not your servant; you are mine! Shoot that man!"

In an instant one of the men had whipped out his gun and fired twice in quick succession. The first bullet bored through the half-breed's temple, killing him instantly. The second sent the snake's head flying from his body.

McGloin turned away, with a satisfied grunt. Then his eyes opened, and a curse flew from his lips.

"He's gone—there he goes! There he goes! Head him off, somebody! Shoot him! Stop him some way!"

He pointed wildly in the direction of the pivot rock. Bill Hoover, a Winchester in his hand and a cartridge-belt and holsters strapped about him, had, in truth, almost reached the shelter of the defile that led to the outlet of the cache.

McGloin's ridiculous display with the revolver had given Hoover further opportunity to escape, and he had made good use of his time. The men had been absorbed—first in Mequi, secondly in McGloin—and for the moment had completely forgotten the captive, whom they thought securely pinioned to the ground. Hoover, after sawing himself, had crept on all fours in the shelter of the encircling rock, and had almost reached the defile when surprised by McGloin.

At their leader's frantic words, the men sprang for their arms. Only a few out of the score present had retained their guns, the rest having relieved themselves of their unnecessary weight by depositing them in the pile from which Hoover had taken his pick.

But these few in an instant had drawn their weapons. But Bill was before them. His Winchester was at his shoulder, and his bullets came humming down the line, firing a bullet every time the magazine lever was pumped open and shut and the trigger pulled. Three of the outlaws were killed outright and two wounded. Before the rest of the men could take the initiative, Bill had disappeared in the mouth of the defile.

Urged on by McGloin's furious threats, the men started for the defile, but immediately fell back, as it began to spit fire, and Bill's unerring marksmanship manifested itself upon them. In fact, McGloin himself listened to reason as a bullet clipped the hat from his head and another made a flesh-wound in his shoulder. It was patent that Bill Hoover could hold the defile against any odds.

Therefore, McGloin and his men took shelter in the overhanging rock, which was on the same side of the cache as the defile, and thus out of reach of Bill's deadly fire. They held a hasty council of war. It seemed at present there was but one thing to do—to await the coming of Cash and his men, who would catch Hoover in the rear. Obviously, Bill's safest place was where he was now. Once he left the shelter of the defile for the trail outside, the men could follow him in safety, and the odds would be turned against him.

The above truth was apparent to Bill himself. He was safe where he was. But he could not stay there forever, and there was the hard fact against him that Cash Dagget and Spanish Joe would return. Again, he wanted to get away, for he might be of some help to Nick Carter, in Lone Dog—certainly not where he was now.

The only plan open to him was to take the risk of a running fight down the trail to Lone Dog. Perhaps he might get a fair start of his enemies, if he led them to still suppose that he was still holding the defile. As a preliminary proceeding, Bill jumped quickly from the defile into the cache.

McGloin and his men were lined up against the wall of rock which lay on the same side of the cache as the defile. They were watching Bill's hiding-place, but, before they could cover him, Hoover sent a fusillade from his Winchester. Then he jumped back to safety before the answering bullets of his opponents could find their mark.

"That'll hold them for awhile!" chuckled Bill grimly. "By the time they beat up the grit to charge me I'll be beating it back to Lone Dog!"

Instantly he ran through the defile, past the pivot rock, and took the trail to the little town.

But Hoover's fusillade, instead of cowing McGloin and his men, only served to further enrage them. Several had sustained flesh-wounds, including McGloin him-

self. The pain served to make them desperate. They knew only a few of them could be killed, if they charged the defile in concert, and each man trusted that his neighbor would be the one to fall a victim to Hoover's unerring marksmanship.

Bill had not left the pivot rock more than a minute, when the entire band of outlaws, urged on by McGloin, who managed to keep diplomatically and modestly in the rear, charged on the defile.

To their surprise, they found it empty, and, encouraged by this fact, and surmising that Hoover had become frightened, they swept victoriously out on the trail.

Bill had been waiting for this move on their part. He had taken up a position some hundred yards down the trail, and, as the outlaws burst from out the pivot rock, all bunched together in their bravado, he calmly pumped half a dozen bullets from his Winchester into them. Three men fell. The rest returned his fire, but what with their excitement and haste, their bullets flew wide.

Bill turned and ran, loading his rifle as he went.

"I guess I can keep up this eight-day go-as-you-please with variations, if I don't bump into Cash and his men!" he mused. "When things get too hot, I can stop and cool their bravery with a little cold lead!"

Down the trail he ran, pursued by McGloin and his men. The outlaws were firing as they ran. Among them was the man who had killed Moqui and the snake so scientifically. All the outlaws were splendid shots, but this man was the best among them.

As Bill Hoover turned, for the second time, to check his pursuers with a bunch of bullets, this man in question dropped to his knee behind his followers, carefully focused Bill between the fore and hind sights of his Winchester, and fired. It was a long, difficult shot, for where Hoover had been aiming at some fifteen men, this man was aiming at but one. But the shot reached home.

Bill felt a sudden biting sting in his right leg, and down he went, the blood flowing warmly into his boot. As he fell, another shot from the same source broke his left forearm.

"This looks like my finish, for sure!" said Hoover cheerfully, as he lay face down on the trail, his Winchester covering the advancing foe. "But, if I never do another thing, I'll take McGloin with me to the Big Divide!"

And Bill grimly waited for McGloin to show himself from among the crowd of oncoming outlaws. It, indeed, looked like his last fight, the end of a valorous resistance against odds.

CHAPTER XII.

NICK CARTER TO THE RESCUE.

As Bill Hoover, badly wounded, was preparing for his last stand on the lone trail, Dutch Fritz, behind the bar of the Lone Dog Saloon, was counting off the numbers that would see the death of either Cash Dagget or Nick Carter.

Both men were ready, their muscles flexed, bodies held in leash for the moment when they would swing round like lightning; their right hands gripping their Colts, muzzles to the ceiling. Such an affair was common to Cash; he had fought in a hundred similar ones, each time coming out the victor. Now he thought such would be the case in this one.

He had already determined that, once having killed Nick Carter, he would shoot Dutch Fritz, and thus clear every obstacle in his path. Wizard of the gun as he was, he readily imagined that such a course would offer no difficulties. But Cash was not facing a tyro. Nick Carter had been there before.

"One!" began Fritz solemnly. "Two—three!"

As quick as a rattler strikes, Cash had swung round on his heel. He did not take time to raise his gun, but fired from the hip as he turned. But Nick had been waiting. At the word "Three!" he had dropped like a flying bullet to the floor, turning as he did so. He beat Cash's first bullet by a fraction of a second. Otherwise, it would have struck him straight between the eyes.

Before Cash could pull trigger again, Nick had fired twice. The first bullet broke Dagget's thumb. His gun fell to the floor. The second struck him in the hip. He crashed to the ground, hopelessly beaten. It had not been Nick's intention to kill the bad man.

Another moment, and he had disarmed Cash, and was standing over him, his gun pointed at the other's heart. Brave as he was, Dagget quailed as he looked up and met the muzzle of the gun, and the steady eyes of the detective behind them. He read death there.

"I said neither of us would leave the Lone Dog alive," said Nick sternly; "but I am going to give you one chance."

"What is it?" asked Cash, a gleam of hope coming to his eyes.

"That you answer certain questions. I'll give you just one minute to consider. First of all, this plot about the kidnaping of Morgan was a scheme to entrap me out here, unknown and away from everybody. McGloin was going to kill me because I was about to expose him for that bribery and intimidation charge?"

Cash hesitated, looked at the gun, looked at the great detective, and then wilted.

"You have me dead to rights," he growled. "Yes, it was all a put-up job."

"I thought so," said Nick grimly. "Fritz," he added, to the barkeeper, "bring me a pen and ink. Now, Cash Dagget, you write down a full confession regarding your part and McGloin's in the bribery charges, and sign it."

"What do I get for it?" glowered Cash.

"Whatever the law will give you. And--this if you don't," added Nick grimly, tapping the Colt.

Again Cash wavered, considered, and wilted.

Laboriously, and with many oaths, he wrote out this confession Nick Carter had commanded.

Nick folded it and placed it carefully in his pocket. Then he and Dutch Fritz bound Dagget hand and foot and laid him beside his three followers.

"Make a pretty bunch," commented Fritz, with a grin. "I guess, boys, you bit off more than you could chew when you stacked up against the closest detective in the world."

The whole proceeding in the Lone Dog had not occupied more than ten or fifteen minutes.

"Now, Fritz," said Nick, "you watch these men while I go for the sheriff. I will need Cash as a witness against McGloin. They are holding Hoover prisoner in the cache, and I must first get him free. Yes, I can do it single-handed——" He stopped as a clatter of hoofs sounded on the street, and, in a cloud of alkali dust, a crowd of men burst into the Lone Dog.

It was Griggs, the foreman of the Bar H Ranch, and his men. Also, the sheriff of Lone Dog.

"Got him at last!" said the men jubilantly, regarding Cash and his men. "We were after them. They ran off a bunch of horses from the Bar H Ranch, and we were going to seize the stuff and locate the cache if it took till next Christmas."

"Come with me, boys, and I'll show you the way," cried Nick Carter.

"Who are you?" demanded the men slowly.

"Nick Carter, the darnest proposition that ever struck this hyar law-abidin' community," cried Dutch Fritz, with a whoop.

The men stood astounded. Then, in a few terse words, the great detective acquainted them with his identity and the foregoing proceedings which had taken place since his arrival in the town.

"And now," he finished, "there is no time to lose. I'm going to get Hoover free and to clean up the rest of that gang which has been a scourge to you all. Are you with me?"

"Well, I guess," cried the men, with a great shout. "May this hyar law-abidin' community just watch our smoke."

And, with a whoop, the men jumped on their horses and, led by Nick Carter, hit the trail to the cache.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ROUND-UP OF "ACE" M'GLOIN.

Big Bill Hoover was making a vicious fight for his life. He had crawled to the shelter of a small boulder that lay on the trail, and from its meager shelter had successfully held McGloin and his men at bay.

By a well-directed shot he had put the unerring marksman who had wounded him out of business. But he had been himself wounded again, and now his arm and leg were numb with pain and loss of blood. As a last measure, he had laid his heavy revolver and bowie-knife at his side. He would use them in the final rush of his foes.

Twice had they stormed him, only to fall back. Now they were preparing for a final charge. Owing to the fact that on one side of the trail was a high, impassable rock, and the other a deep abyss, Hoover could be only attacked in front. Otherwise, he would have long since been surrounded and shot to pieces from all quarters.

But, unknown to Hoover, help was almost at hand. Guided by Nick Carter, the sheriff, Griggs, and his men had come within sound of the firing. Instantly Nick surmised the true state of affairs. The long period between each shot, and then half a dozen coming in quick succession, could only mean one thing. Hoover was out on the trail, and standing off McGloin and his men.

Instantly Nick gave an order. The men divided into two parties. Half a mile south of the cache the trail spread out into the broken lands of the "bad lands." It did the same half a mile north of the cache. Thus the deep abyss only paralleled the trail for one mile.

Nick's plan was this: One-half of his men would ride post-haste half a mile above the cache. Then they would return on the trail, while the other half, led by himself, would ride on. Thus they would catch McGloin and his men between two fires. By the time they had turned to hide in the cache, on the approach of Nick Carter, they would meet the sheriff and his men, who would head them off. For, once in the cache, owing to the strange conformity of the pivot rock and the narrow defile, it would have taken considerable time, loss of life, and trouble to "smoke" the outlaws out.

"Hurry up, boys! Ride like blazes!" cried Nick.

Away the men sped, as silently as possible, while Nick and his men took up the trail.

Meanwhile, Bill Hoover grimly awaited the end. The outlaws were consulting together. Suddenly Hoover saw what they had been waiting for, and he understood. Two of the men had returned to the cache, and now appeared leading half a dozen broncos. They did not intend to mount them. They would not expose themselves to that much danger. Instead, they would stampede the horses, and cause them to charge down in a body on the defenseless Hoover. Under cover of the animals, and while their opponent was trying to escape their hoofs, the outlaws could then charge and pour in the finishing volley.

"They're a brave lot of men!" commented Bill grimly. "This is sixteen to one, all right, but it's lead currency—not silver! Not contented with those odds, they must ring in half a dozen broncos to take the blows, while they do the fighting. I wish McGloin would show himself, so as I could pop him! He's a dum sight too modest! Well, I guess it's up to you, Bill, to try to stampede those horses before they get coming your way!"

Even imminent danger could not dampen the old hotel-man and scout's cheerful philosophy.

In a moment he had raised his Winchester and sent a ball of bullets among the feet of the broncos. Instantly they began kicking right and left, and Bill had to laugh, the way the outlaws' boomerang had returned on themselves. Instead of stampeding their enemy, the horses made fair to stampede the outlaws. The latter saw that their plan was hopeless. Wild with anger, they now mounted the animals, the rest of the men taking shelter behind them. Another second, and they charged down upon Mr. Hoover.

"Getting kind o' warm!" said Bill, as he worked the lever of his magazine rifle. Two saddles were emptied, but the outlaws were not stopped. Hoover discarded his empty gun; there was no time to reload. Seizing his Colt and bowie-knife, he grimly awaited the onslaught.

And then a clatter of hoofs sounded from his rear.

"Cash and his men coming back! Good-by!" thought Bill, raising his revolver for a final fusillade.

But, instead, round the bend of the trail came Nick Carter and his men, whooping like Indians. Their revolvers cracked out in one continuous volley, as, splitting, they swept past the prostrate Hoover and crashed down upon McGloin and his oncoming men.

It took but one glance for the amiable politician and his men to see that they were in for a fight that would be against them. With one accord, they turned and fled in the direction of the sheltering cache. And then down came the sheriff of Lone Dog and the remainder of the cattle-punchers of the Bar H Ranch. They caught the outlaws in the rear.

Back and forth went shot after shot. It lasted but a brief time, Bill Hoover, standing on his wounded leg and contributing a discriminating bullet from his revolver to the general storm, while he waved his hat with the other wounded hand.

The battle had ended. The cache was a thing of the past, as far as its mystery was concerned. Cash Dagget was a prisoner, wounded. Spanish Joe was dead. Half of the outlaws were dead, the others wounded and prisoners. McGloin was lying on the trail, propped against the wall. A bullet had scored his flabby face.

"The game's up, McGloin!" said Nick Carter grimly, going over to him. "I've got Cash Dagget safe in the Lone Dog, and Spanish Joe is dead. I've got the evidence necessary to convict you on that bribery charge. There'll be another charge against you, too—just a few more that will send you to State's prison, if not to the chair."

"Water!" whispered McGloin faintly, his head falling forward on his breast.

Even charitable to an inveterate and deadly foe, Nick ordered one of the men to bring some water. He knelt down by the gambler and politician, supporting him with his arm.

"Look out!" called Hoover suddenly, fear in his voice.

For, like lightning, the supposed fainting man had revived. He had drawn a knife, and now made a savage lunge at the detective.

"I've got you, I've got you!" he cried, with fiendish triumph.

But he hadn't. Nick dodged the blow like a flash. Before he could wrench the knife from the other's hand, there came a shot, and McGloin sank slowly on his side.

"I didn't kill him," said Hoover, limping up, his smoking gun in his hand, "because I thought you wanted him alive. Only for that, I would have."

Nick Carter put out his hand and silently gripped that of Hoover.

"This is the end of the story, boys," he said quietly, embracing the assembled men in his speech; "and it has been a success. I am glad I struck Wyoming. I've wound up a tough game, and I've met the men who *are* men in every sense of the word. Friends tried and true; loyal, patriotic—true blue! True products of the great West. I hope that this meeting will not be our last."

The men grinned foolishly, and blushed like the proverbial schoolgirl. Finally big Bill Hoover voiced the sentiment of the crowd.

"An' I says, an' we says," he began gravely, "that the thanks of Wyoming an' Lone Dog are all yours. An that Nick Carter is the greatest proposition that ever blew into this hyar peaceful an' law-abiding community."

It was just a month later that Cash Dagget and Ace McGloin, after a sojourn in the hospital, were tried by jury, and sent to a long term in State's prison. Thus successfully terminated a plot against Nick Carter's life—successfully for the great detective.

THE END.

The next issue, No. 505, will contain "The Man of Many Faces; or, Nick Carter Behind the Scenes." Ready next week.

ABOUT THE EARLY NUMBERS OF THE

TIP TOP WEEKLY

WE receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 200 are entirely out of print. We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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